



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



FRIDAY — 4 FEB 2022

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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	02/03 Biggest 1-day loss in history for a company
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SOURCE	https://www.cnbc.com/2022/02/03/facebook-232-billion-drop-in-value-sets-all-time-record.html
GIST	<p>Facebook parent Meta lost more than \$232 billion in value Thursday. That's the biggest one-day drop in value in the history of the U.S. stock market.</p> <p>Meta's plunge, based on a weaker-than-expected revenue forecast, topped the prior record set by Apple, when it lost \$182 billion in market value in September 2020.</p> <p>The seven biggest drops in stock market history have all occurred in the last two years, as Apple, Microsoft, Tesla and Amazon have ballooned in valuation. Prior to 2020, the largest drop was from Facebook — a \$119 billion decline in 2018. That also occurred after Facebook forecast revenue below analyst estimates.</p> <p>Meta's drop in value comes as the company is looking past its current businesses, such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, and toward the metaverse, a virtual world based on new technology. Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg announced Wednesday Meta had a net loss of \$10 billion in 2021 attributable to Meta's investment in the metaverse.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Spokane schools face teacher shortages
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/education/spokane-schools-addressing-covid-absences/293-3520dcf2-3df7-4d48-84b5-69cb59af58f3
GIST	<p>SPOKANE, Wash. — Spokane teachers are stretched thin as Spokane Public Schools (SPS) struggles with staffing shortages due to COVID-19. For the past month, school administrators are frantically strategizing where to move teachers and students.</p> <p>Stevens Elementary Principal Adrian Espindola said the school had 20 staff members out due to COVID-19 in mid-January.</p> <p>“There are days, especially in the past few weeks, that have been pretty hectic, and our hair was on fire not knowing exactly what we’re going to do secure coverage in classrooms,” Espindola said.</p> <p>As absences persist, administrators strategize on a whiteboard each morning to figure out how to fill the gaps.</p> <p>“We end up listing all the teachers' names and who can provide coverage underneath,” Espindola said. “And if we’re splitting up classrooms, do the same thing.”</p> <p>Some days, teachers are put on a rotating schedule and can be assigned to cover a classroom for anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour.</p> <p>“We hate to kind of do that,” Espindola said. “Just because it means that there are sometimes eight to nine adults in front of one group of kids inside of a day.”</p> <p>At times, students also get moved to a different class.</p> <p>“A couple of weeks ago, I had a week where I had five different third graders from different classes in my room with me while their teachers were out,” fourth-grade teacher Kacie Fincher said.</p> <p>The lack of teachers has been overwhelming at times, according to Fincher, especially when it means no breaks or prep time.</p> <p>“There was a couple of weeks where we weren’t getting preps at all,” Fincher said. “So instead of having that time to prepare our own classrooms and getting ready for our own kids and learning, we had to do that outside of contract hours.”</p>

	<p>When they can, administrators do try to give that time back by taking multiple classes outside for half an hour.</p> <p>SPS said it is starting to see a slight decrease in teacher absences and is hopeful that the trend will continue.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 King Co. new Covid cases declining
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/new-covid-19-cases-declining-king-county/2AYVEYJ4KNCYZOKI3AKXAWLW2Y/
GIST	<p>KING COUNTY, Wash. — New COVID-19 cases have been dropping in King County since Jan. 10, but the county’s health officer said the pandemic isn’t over yet.</p> <p>“For right now, there’s still a whole lot of COVID-19 going on,” said Dr. Jeff Duchin of Public Health - Seattle & King County.</p> <p>Duchin said Thursday that King County is now averaging 2,200 new cases each day, down from 6,400 on Jan. 10.</p> <p>He said the next question is whether the omicron subvariant, known as BA2, will somehow slow the decline.</p> <p>“It’s not clear what the impact of BA2 will be on the omicron surge, whether it will prolong its tail, or perhaps lead to a second peak, or perhaps have no detectable impact at all,” Duchin said.</p> <p>With lots of people still getting COVID, home tests remain important.</p> <p>So far, health officials with the state of Washington say they have shipped 1.4 million free tests.</p> <p>The U.S. Postal Service has a bigger job, delivering half a billion free tests to start.</p> <p>“We are continuing to provide the resources necessary for people in the United States to keep themselves safe,” Adm. Rachel Levine, U.S. assistant secretary for health, told KIRO 7 last week.</p> <p>David Yao, a local postal union leader, said USPS is hiring temporary workers at a facility in Tukwila to handle tests for the Northwest.</p> <p>“It’s a huge organizational challenge and the Postal Service has never done anything like this,” Yao said.</p> <p>It comes as postal workers try to keep up with the continued high demand for packages and cover for colleagues out sick.</p> <p>“It’s a struggle, people are working long hours,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 First Pierce Co. flu death reported this year
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/woman-dies-from-the-flu-first-pierce-county-death-reported-this-season
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. – Pierce County is reporting its first flu death this season.</p> <p>A woman in her 70s, who did have underlying health conditions.</p> <p>The Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department (TPCHD) said the flu has not been spreading much since December.</p>

	<p>Pierce Co. saw 31 reported flu deaths in 2017-18, the most severe year for the flu in the U.S. in what the department said was 'many years.'</p> <p>The flu and COVID-19 are both circulating and share symptoms, it's important to get tested and realize the difference in the two. You can read more here. https://www.tpchd.org/Home/Components/Blog/Blog/32361/333</p> <p>TPCHD advises to get the flu shot, the best way to avoid coming down with the illness.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/04 Russia, China unveils global alliance
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/putin-xi-mix-politics-sport-unveiling-alliance-olympics-2022-02-04/
GIST	<p>BEIJING, Feb 4 (Reuters) - Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled a global alliance with an anti-Western tilt on Friday, just hours before the grand opening of the Olympics in Beijing, in a striking juxtaposition of politics and sport.</p> <p>Xi later kicked off the opening ceremony, joined by International Olympic Committee Chairman Thomas Bach as he entered Beijing's famed Bird Nest stadium, its rim decked with the flags of the 91 countries and regions taking part.</p> <p>The event was to feature 3,000 performers on a stage comprised of 11,600 square metres of high-definition LED screen resembling an ice surface.</p> <p>The crowd was pared down, with organisers deciding last month not to sell tickets to Olympic events to curtail the spread of COVID-19. A "closed loop" separates competitors and other personnel from the Chinese public throughout the Olympics.</p> <p>Using the day to announce the new Russian-Chinese alliance was an extraordinary reminder that the games were taking place on a backdrop of geopolitical rivalry unseen since the 1980s - when the United States boycotted games in Moscow and the Soviet Union stayed away from Los Angeles four years later.</p> <p>With geopolitical tensions on both sides of the Eurasian land mass at their most taut for decades, Putin and Xi publicly took each other's sides in a range of disputes, notably Ukraine, where the West accuses Putin of preparing for war.</p> <p>The lengthy joint statement released after their meeting occasionally veered into Cold War-era rhetoric, condemning "certain states' attempts to impose their own 'democratic standards' on other countries".</p> <p>"Such attempts at hegemony pose serious threats to global and regional peace and stability and undermine the stability of the world order," they said.</p> <p>DIPLOMATIC BOYCOTT</p> <p>The United States and other countries have declined to send dignitaries to Beijing, citing alleged human rights abuses, which Beijing denies.</p> <p>China's role in international sport has also drawn other uncomfortable headlines in recent months, with the women's tennis tour cancelling events there over the case of Peng Shuai, a tennis player who appeared to vanish after accusing a senior official of sexual assault. Chinese media have shown Peng making public appearances, including a video phone call last year with Olympics boss Bach.</p> <p>"I would like to thank you for the invitation to the opening of the Olympic Games," Putin told Xi. "We know firsthand that this is a huge job. I am sure that our Chinese friends have done it brilliantly, as you always do when preparing such major events."</p>

	<p>In Putin and Xi's joint statement, China backed Russia's longstanding call for NATO to halt its expansion - Moscow's central demand in a dispute with Western countries that say they believe Putin is preparing for war in Ukraine.</p> <p>Russia, which has deployed more than 100,000 troops to the Ukrainian frontier, denies planning to invade but says it could take unspecified military action unless demands are met, including barring Ukraine from ever joining NATO.</p> <p>Moscow, for its part, said it fully supported Beijing's stance on Taiwan and opposed Taiwanese independence in any form. L8N2UF2RX</p> <p>A broadcast aired in Moscow showed Xi and Putin, neither wearing a mask, sitting opposite each across a large table in a Beijing state guesthouse, surrounded by masked aides.</p> <p>"I am ready to work with President Putin to plan the blueprint and steer the course for Sino-Russian relations under new historical conditions," Xinhua quoted Xi as saying.</p> <p>China state television footage showed a jet flying with the Russian and Chinese flags. Next to it were jets with Mongolian and Serbian flags. Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic and Prime Minister L. Oyun-Erdene of Mongolia were expected to attend the opening ceremony later on Friday.</p> <p>Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and the United Arab Emirates' Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan had also touched down, according to state media reports.</p> <p>Before this week, Beijing had not received foreign political guests for almost two years as it tried to keep the coronavirus out.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/04 India Covid deaths 500,000; undercount?
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-reports-over-500000-deaths-covid-19-experts-count-millions-more-2022-02-04/
GIST	<p>NEW DELHI, Feb 4 (Reuters) - India's official COVID-19 death toll crossed 500,000 on Friday, a level some data analysts said was breached last year but was obscured by inaccurate surveys and unaccounted dead in the hinterlands, where millions remain vulnerable to the disease.</p> <p>The country, which has the fourth-highest tally of deaths globally, recorded 400,000 deaths by July 2021 after the devastating outbreak from the Delta variant of the coronavirus, according to official data. Some believe the figures were much higher.</p> <p>"Our study published in the journal Science estimates 3 million COVID deaths in India until mid-2021 using three different databases," Chinmay Tumbe, an assistant professor at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, who co-authored the study, told Reuters.</p> <p>Last month, the Indian government dismissed the study as baseless in a notification saying there is a robust system of birth and death reporting.</p> <p>India's states record deaths from COVID after collating data from their districts. In the last few months, several states have updated the number of deaths, some under pressure from the country's top court. In most instances, authorities said there were lapses due to delayed registrations and other administrative errors.</p> <p>India is currently in the midst of a third wave of the coronavirus led by the Omicron variant, which some top experts say is already in community transmission although federal officials say most cases are mild.</p> <p>read more</p>

Last month, the government eased testing norms and told states to drop mandatory testing for contacts of confirmed cases unless they were old or battling other conditions. But, with the number of tests falling, the government issued a revised circular warning states they would miss the spread of the virus.

According to official figures, India's overall number of COVID infections has reached 41.95 million, the second-highest globally behind the United States.

To prevent new surges, the government has vaccinated three-fourths of the eligible 939 million adult population with the mandatory two-dose regime.

Indian officials are carrying out a vaccination drive in remote parts of the country to increase lagging vaccination rates, with health workers going door-to-door to administer shots.

"I make them understand how important vaccines are to escape from coronavirus," health worker Asmita Koladiya, who is forced to take her infant daughter along with her because of a lack of childcare, told Reuters.

In the country's capital Delhi, as new infections of the Omicron variant fell sharply off the peak, authorities further eased curbs and said they will allow schools and colleges to reopen from Monday, and permit private offices to be fully staffed.

The city's sports complexes will also reopen, its Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia said in a webcast on Friday.

RECONCILIATION WITH TIME, GRIEF

India's cumulative tally of 500,055 deaths on Friday included 1,072 fatalities reported over the last 24 hours, according to the federal health ministry. Out of this, 335 deaths were reported from the southern state of Kerala that has, for weeks, been updating data with deaths from last year.

Kerala, with less than 3% of India's 1.35 billion population, accounts for nearly 11% of the total deaths reported in the country.

"Some states such as Kerala are recording their backlog deaths under judicial pressure, although not all states have done that," said Gautam Menon, a professor of physics and biology at Ashoka University near the capital who has been tracking the spread of the virus.

In Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat, authorities have received over 100,000 claims for COVID-19 compensation, of which 87,000 claims have been approved, according to a senior government official.

The number of claims received is nearly 10 times the official COVID-19 death toll of 10,545, as per government data.

"There has not been any under-reporting of COVID-19 deaths...The policy for paying compensation is very liberal as per the Supreme Court's directives, which is why the number of applicants is more than the COVID-19 deaths," the official said, declining to be identified due to the sensitive nature of discussions.

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HEADLINE	02/04 South Africa more omicron subvariant
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-seeing-more-cases-omicron-sub-variant-monitoring-it-2022-02-04/
GIST	JOHANNESBURG, Feb 4 (Reuters) - South Africa is seeing more cases of the BA.2 sub-variant of the Omicron coronavirus variant and is monitoring it, but there is no clear sign that BA.2 is substantially different from the original Omicron strain, a senior scientist said on Friday.

Michelle Groome, from the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, showed in a presentation that BA.2 accounted for 23% of the 450 samples from January sequenced by South Africa's genomic surveillance network and the original strain 75%.

Of the 2,243 samples from December that were sequenced, BA.2 accounted for 4% and the original strain 94%.

"We are seeing this increase with the BA.2, we are still trying to get more information on this particular sub-lineage ... and so we are increasing sequencing from those provinces where we are seeing increases (in cases) monitoring the proportion that is due to BA.2," Groome told a news conference.

"At this stage, there is no indication that there would be ... differences between these different sub-lineages of Omicron. As we saw with Delta there were lots of lineages and we didn't see a lot of difference between them, but we will keep monitoring," she added.

Asked whether there were signs BA.2 was causing different symptoms, she said she was not expecting marked changes. Scientists will analyse hospitalisation data for clues about the severity of illness linked to the sub-variant, she said.

South Africa entered a fourth wave of COVID-19 infections driven by Omicron late last year, shortly after alerting the world to the emergence of the highly transmissible variant.

Daily infections started to decline from mid-December after hitting a record of more than 26,000, and they have stabilised in recent weeks at about 3,000 new cases a day.

Health Minister Joe Phaahla said the country was not out of the fourth wave and there could be a fifth wave closer to winter. He said the past two weeks had been a bit of a "stalemate" in terms of new cases.

"There's no serious decline and yet no worrying rise in infections," he said, adding that the opening of schools and increased movement after the holidays could be reasons why there had not been a larger drop in new infections.

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HEADLINE	02/04 Oil prices climb to new 7yr-high
SOURCE	https://www.marketwatch.com/story/oil-prices-climb-to-new-seven-year-high-above-91-a-barrel-11643971736
GIST	<p>Crude marked a fresh seven-year high above \$91 a barrel on Friday, as a harsh winter storm raged in the U.S., piling onto a myriad of worries about supply.</p> <p>“The latest upswing was triggered by a cold snap in Texas, which is fueling concerns about production outages in the Permian Basin, the largest U.S. shale play. A year ago, a period of extreme cold weather had caused massive disruptions to oil production there,” said Carsten Fritsch, commodity analyst at Commerzbank, in a note to clients.</p> <p>About 350,000 homes and businesses in states such as Tennessee, Arkansas and Texas were without power in the U.S. on Friday, due to a winter storm that brought amid freezing rain and snow. More heavy snow and ice was expected to hit the eastern portion of the country on Friday.</p> <p>Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott said the state was holding up, with about 70,000 outages by Thursday morning, compared to a crippling storm last year that left 4 million without power.</p> <p>West Texas Intermediate crude for March delivery CL00, 1.94% CL.1, 1.95% CLH22, 1.94% climbed by \$1.88, or 2.1%, to \$92.15 a barrel, trading at a level last seen in October 2014, according to FactSet.</p>

A day earlier, the contract settled up \$2.01, or 2.3%, to settle at \$90.72 a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange — the highest front-month contract finish since Oct. 6, 2014.

April Brent crude BRN00, 1.90% BRNJ22, 1.90%, the global benchmark, gained \$1.86, or 2%, to \$92.97 a barrel, following Thursday's gain that took it 1.8% higher to \$91.11 a barrel on ICE Futures Exchange. That Friday level, if it holds, would mark the highest settlement since Oct. 6, 2014, according to FactSet.

Fritsch said Commerzbank is lifting its Brent forecast for this year to \$90 per barrel in the current quarter from \$80. "This is due to the steep rise in the risk premium on account of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which is only likely to diminish gradually. For this reason, we expect the oil price to be still elevated in the second quarter at \$85 (previous forecast: \$75)," he said, in a note to clients.

Stronger-than-expected demand, expected to regain its pre-pandemic level by midyear at the latest, is also a key reason. "What is more, OPEC+ has been unable for months to fully implement the agreed production hikes," he said.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies on Wednesday stuck with a plan to boost production by another 400,000 barrels a day in March.

"Recently, more and more countries have failed to meet their production targets," said Fritsch. "Many of them are now close to the limits of their production capacity. The discrepancy between agreed and actual production is therefore likely to widen further in the coming months, assuming that Saudi Arabia and other countries with spare capacities do not step up their production to a greater extent."

In other energy trading, March gasoline RBH22, 1.46% rose 1.4% to \$2.6804 a gallon, while March heating oil HOH22, 1.92% added 1.4% to \$2.89 a gallon.

March natural-gas futures NGH22, -1.88% fell 2.8% to \$4.749 per million British thermal units.

Economic data will be in focus for Friday, with investors bracing for what could be the worst U.S. jobs report in more than a year, due to a record wave of coronavirus case, with just 150,000 jobs expected to have been created in January. Economists warned that the report could even show a drop in payrolls, as a result of the omicron variant, though any decline would likely be sharply reversed in February.

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HEADLINE	02/04 UK Queen to mark 70yrs on throne
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/queen-elizabeth-ii-70-years-ab40326fbd7bdca7a536ece0497f2da7
GIST	<p>LONDON (AP) — Elizabeth Alexandra Mary Windsor wasn't born to wear the crown. But destiny intervened.</p> <p>The woman who became Queen Elizabeth II will mark 70 years on the throne Sunday, an unprecedented reign that has made her a symbol of stability as the United Kingdom navigated an age of uncertainty.</p> <p>From her early days as a glamorous young royal in glittering tiaras to her more recent incarnation as the nation's grandmother, the queen has witnessed the end of the British Empire, the advent of multiculturalism, the rise of international terrorism, and the challenges posed by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. In a world of relentless change, she has been a constant — representing the U.K.'s interests abroad, applauding the nation's successes and commiserating in its failures, and always remaining above the fray of politics.</p> <p>That constancy should earn Elizabeth a royal epithet like those of her predecessors such as William the Conqueror, Edward the Confessor and Alfred the Great, said royal historian Hugo Vickers.</p>

"I've always thought she should be called Elizabeth the Steadfast," Vickers told The Associated Press. "I think it's a perfect way of describing her. She wasn't necessarily expecting to be queen, and she embraced that duty."

As the elder daughter of King George V's second son, Elizabeth, now 95, was expected to live the life of a minor royal when she was born on April 21, 1926. Dogs and horses, a country house, a suitable match — a comfortable but uneventful life — seemed her future.

But everything changed a decade later when her uncle, King Edward VIII, abdicated so he could marry the American divorcee Wallis Simpson. Elizabeth's father became King George VI, making the young princess heir apparent.

George VI, whose struggles to overcome a stutter were portrayed in the 2010 film "The King's Speech," endeared himself to the nation when he refused to leave London as bombs fell during the early months of World War II.

Elizabeth followed her father in leading by example, joining the Auxiliary Territorial Service in early 1945, becoming the first female member of the Royal Family to join the armed services as a full-time active member. On her 21st birthday, she dedicated her life to the nation and the Commonwealth, the voluntary association of states that grew out of the British Empire.

"I declare before you all that my whole life, whether it be long or short, shall be devoted to your service and the service of our great imperial family to which we all belong," she said in a radio address broadcast around the world.

In 1952, the young princess embarked on a tour of the Commonwealth in place of her ailing father. She was at a remote Kenyan lodge, where she and her husband Prince Philip watched baboons from the treetops, when she heard her father had died.

She immediately returned to London, disembarking the plane in black mourning clothes, to begin her life as queen. She has reigned ever since, with crown and scepter on big occasions, but more commonly wearing a broad-brimmed hat and carrying a simple handbag.

In the intervening seven decades, the queen has shared confidences with 14 prime ministers and met 13 U.S. presidents.

Once a year, she travels the mile or so from Buckingham Palace to the House of Lords for the ceremonial opening of Parliament. And when world leaders come to call she hosts state banquets during which her diamonds flash under the TV lights and presidents and prime ministers worry about whether to bow and when to offer a toast.

But it is the less lavish events that give the queen a link to the public.

At the garden parties that honor the service of everyone from soldiers and charity workers to long-serving school librarians and crossing guards, guests wear festive hats and drink tea as they try to catch a glimpse of the queen on the lawn outside Buckingham Palace. The honorees can spot her at a distance, as it is said she favors bright colors so the public can spot her in a crowd.

Then there is the annual wreath laying at the memorial to those who have died during conflicts around the world, as well as the numerous school openings, hospice visits and tours of maternity wards that have filled her days.

Britain's longest-serving monarch, the only sovereign most Britons have ever known, has been a constant presence from the Suez Crisis of 1956, when Egypt's seizure of the Suez Canal underscored Britain's declining might, through the labor strife of the 1980s and the 2005 terror attacks in London..

When Prince Philip died during the pandemic, she donned a black face mask and sat alone during his socially distanced funeral, silently demonstrating that the rules applied to everyone — particularly her.

“She’s not beholden to the electorate. She’s not dependent on her latest hit or her latest movie,” said Emily Nash, royal editor of HELLO! magazine. “She’s just there. She does what she does. She carries out her duties without ever complaining or making any personal drama. And people respect her for that.”

Not that there haven’t been controversies.

In the early 1990s, criticism of the monarchy increased amid reports of the queen’s private wealth and concerns about the expense of the monarchy. In 1992, the queen agreed to pay the expenses of most of her family and become the first monarch to pay income taxes since the 1930s.

Tensions flared again in 1997 when the royal family’s silence after the death of Princess Diana, the ex-wife of Prince Charles, fueled the resentment of Diana’s many fans.

Even now, the monarchy is struggling to distance itself from the scandal caused by a sex abuse lawsuit filed against Prince Andrew, the queen’s second son, and the fallout after two of the royal family’s most popular members, Prince Harry and his wife Meghan, ditched their royal duties and departed for California.

But the queen has transcended scandal and remained popular throughout it all, said Kelly Beaver, the CEO of polling firm Ipsos UK, which has tracked her popularity for decades.

“Part of this because she is so synonymous with ... the monarchy, which is something the British people are proud of,” Beaver said.

Still, Tiwa Adebayo, a social media commentator and writer who inherited a fascination with the monarchy from her grandmother, believes younger people want “more transparency” — to see the royal family move beyond the adage of “never complain, never explain” that has typified the queen’s reign.

For the queen, Sunday is likely to be bittersweet, marking both her long reign and the 70th anniversary of her father’s death.

“I’ve always thought that one of her philosophies really was that, you know, she just wanted to be a really good daughter to her father and fulfill all his hopes for her,” Vickers said. “And, you know, assuming that there is an after-life and they meet again, my goodness he will be able to thank her for doing just that.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 Healthcare system ‘broken beyond repair’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/feb/03/us-coronavirus-healthcare-system-providers
GIST	<p>Dr Brian Resler, an emergency physician in the San Francisco Bay Area, recently polled a group of doctors on an overnight shift about their jobs.</p> <p>“Everyone of us said if we could go back, we would choose a different career,” said Resler, who spoke on the condition that the Guardian does not identify his hospital.</p> <p>Resler and his fellow doctors feel that way although California has recently seen a sharp decrease in the number of Covid-19 cases after the spike due to the highly contagious Omicron variant. That slump in cases has largely been mirrored across the US as the Omicron wave has peaked and many parts of the US are firmly on its downslope.</p> <p>But, while some health experts have predicted that the worst of the pandemic is behind us, the ripple effects of the virus, such as its impact on patients needing care for other issues, continue to test the limits of the US healthcare system and its providers.</p>

“Most people got into healthcare because they wanted to help people and make a difference, and I think at this point, it’s just broken beyond repair,” said Resler, 36, who has worked in emergency medicine for seven years.

Across the country, the daily average of Covid-19 cases and daily average of hospitalizations due to the virus has decreased by 49% and 16% respectively over the past two weeks, according to the New York Times [data](#).

Despite those positive trends, 80% of US hospitals in the last week of January were under “high or extreme stress”, meaning that more than 10% of their hospitalizations were due to Covid-19, [according to data](#) compiled by National Public Radio using a framework from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.

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California was the tenth worst in the country with 69% of hospitals were under extreme stress, meaning that more than 20% of those facilities’ hospitalizations were due to Covid-19.

“Even though the odds of getting very sick with Omicron and the odds of getting sick once you are vaccinated and boosted are lower, the sheer number of infections means that there are still going to be a lot of sick people,” said Resler, who explained that most of the Covid-19 patients who were hospitalized were unvaccinated.

Also, because of the threat of the virus, many people earlier in the pandemic were afraid or unable to seek care for their health issues. Now that delay is catching up with patients, Resler said.

“That leads to a lot of overwhelming of the system and a lot of angry patients. A lot of patients hear that things are overwhelmed, but when faced with long wait times and an overwhelmed emergency department, it’s a lot different to see it for yourself when you are sick and seeking care than hearing about it,” he said.

In Missouri, the second worst state in the country for hospitalizations, 79% of the hospitals are under extreme stress. At Mercy hospital in Springfield, in the south-western part of the state, about 28% of their hospitalizations are Covid-19 patients, according to Erik Frederick, the hospital’s chief administrative office.

Even if patients were admitted for other reasons but happened to test positive for Covid-19, “those patients require the same amount of resources, as far as isolation and all the personal protective equipment and human resources,” said Frederick.

The virulence of the Omicron variant means that the hospitals also have a significant number of staff who test positive for the virus and must then quarantine. This creates an increased patient load for the providers that are left, and hospitals must offer incentives to encourage staff to pick up additional shifts and hire nurses from outside agencies, Frederick said.

“It creates a lot of stress on the healthcare system,” Frederick said.

Children’s hospitals have also not been immune from the strain caused by the Omicron variant. Over two weeks in January, there was a 20% increase in the cumulative number of child Covid-19 cases, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Every few hours at University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, the house supervisor, who coordinates care for patients, sends out alerts about the numbers of available beds in particular units.

“When those numbers get small, it means that we have to make some hard decisions,” said Dr Rachel Pearson, assistant professor of pediatrics and the medical humanities at UT Health San Antonio.

“Sometimes that means kids who I would prefer to be upstairs with my hospital pediatrics team are stranded in the [emergency department].”

Sometimes the hospital has to stop accepting transfer patients from smaller hospitals or clinics or had to have those patients wait in the emergency department.

“We are stretched. It seems like we have been able to find creative solutions to safely care for kids for the most part, but I really feel for those rural doctors out there because I know sometimes they are on the phone and making call, after call, after call, trying to find a hospital with a higher level of care that can accept their sick patient,” said Pearson.

Still, Pearson is encouraged that the Food and Drug Administration could soon authorize the Pfizer vaccine against Covid-19 for children under five.

And Frederick, who also sees patients from rural areas with low vaccination rates, said he is optimistic about the future of the pandemic.

“I’m optimistic about the numbers, but most of my optimism comes from my team and how they have responded and continue to respond,” he said.

Resler isn’t so optimistic. His early interest in emergency medicine came from the rewarding nature of providing care to patients, some of whom don’t initially have a heartbeat. Now he and colleagues talk about the “thank you” to “[expletive] you,” ratio, and the former is consistently outweighed by the latter, he said.

“I spend most of my day apologizing and being yelled at,” said Resler. “We had similar issues years ago, but it’s just gotten much worse, to the point where anytime I go see a new patient, it’s a pleasant surprise when they are not angry at me.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 Russia inches closer China: cold war looms
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/03/xi-putin-summit-russia-inches-closer-china-new-cold-war-looms
GIST	<p>When the leaders of China and Russia meet in Beijing this Friday shortly before the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics, observers of the bilateral relationship will be looking for insights into how this 21st century quasi-alliance is reshaping the postwar world order.</p> <p>It was 50 years ago this month, on 21 February 1972, that the historic handshake between Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong changed the geometry of the cold war. Historians called the visit “the week that changed the world”. It later influenced Washington’s subsequent movement towards détente with Moscow.</p> <p>Yet, half a century on, with talk of another cold war – this time between the US and China – on the rise, Moscow and Beijing are, instead, inching closer. Amid the unfolding crisis in Ukraine, Beijing last week publicly seconded Moscow’s “security concerns” regarding Nato. On Thursday, it released a statement saying its and Russia’s foreign ministers had coordinated their positions on regional issues of common concern, including Ukraine, Afghanistan and the Korean peninsula.</p> <p>“This will be their 38th [meeting] since 2013, [and] is uniquely significant because of the foreign policy challenges each leader is facing at the moment,” David Shullman, senior director of the Global China Hub at the Atlantic Council, said of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.</p> <p>“Putin appreciates Chinese public expressions of support for Russia’s position on Ukraine that demonstrate the Kremlin is not isolated internationally,” he said. “For China, Putin’s visit is an important demonstration of support at a time when the US, UK, and other countries are undertaking a diplomatic boycott of the Games.”</p>

This week's meeting will be Xi's first in-person interaction with a foreign leader in nearly two years. China's propaganda machine is already in full gear ahead of the event. In state media, the name of the Russian president [tops the official list](#) of foreign dignitaries. Earlier this week, the state news agency Xinhua in a long article [extolled the friendship](#) between the two countries.

"China-Russia leaders' 'Winter Olympics appointment' opens a new chapter in the bilateral relations," the headline declared. The article has since been republished by other major state-owned websites in the last few days.

The Xi-Putin meeting will be closely watched in Washington as well as other major western capitals. Inevitably, according to analysts, the issue of Ukraine will loom large. In 2014, in a show of defiance against fierce western criticism over the annexation of Crimea, Putin turned to Xi to look for an alternative. Beijing showed its support by signing a \$400bn, 30-year gas deal.

As the crisis in Ukraine brews, Russia is once again facing international pressure and is seeking foreign allies in its [standoff with the west](#). In the current situation, Russia "needs China much more than the other way around", said Alexander Gabuev, the chair of the Russia in the Asia-Pacific Program at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, during a roundtable discussion on Wednesday.

Describing the mood in Moscow, Gabuev said: "China is very pragmatic and has a lot of leverage ... China's bargaining position is strengthened day by day, so it's better to sign a deal with China now rather than tomorrow."

Putin will enter the meeting with Xi looking to do just that. The Kremlin is embarking on the rare foreign visit with a docket of 15 contracts and agreements it wants to sign with the Chinese leadership, including a joint statement that will "reflect the common views of Russia and China on key global issues, including security issues".

It appears the Kremlin will seek formal Chinese support in its conflict with Nato countries.

"Beijing supports Russia's demands on security guarantees, China shares the stance that security of one country cannot be ensured by means of damaging another country's security," said the Kremlin aide Yuri Ushakov, adding they were calling for the "creation of efficient mechanisms of ensuring security in [Europe](#) through negotiations".

In an article published in the Chinese state news agency Xinhua, Putin also noted joint efforts to expand payments in national currencies and create "mechanisms to offset the negative impact of unilateral sanctions". US lawmakers have threatened to impose the "mother of all sanctions" if Russia launches a new invasion of Ukraine.

Putin will be accompanied by a handful of top diplomatic and energy officials, including his foreign and energy ministers and the Rosneft chief executive, Igor Sechin. That indicates that economic and energy cooperation are likely to be a focus of the talks on Friday.

Ushakov said the two sides would also discuss plans for the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, which would allow Russia to redirect gas away from Europe via its controversial [Nord Stream 2 pipeline](#) and sell it instead on the Chinese market. However, even if the two sides do strike an agreement, the pipeline would take years to build.

The summit will mark Putin's third trip abroad since the outbreak of coronavirus in late 2019. The two leaders are expected to hold talks on the morning of 4 February and then have a private lunch that "will help them have a maximally open discussion about the most important international and bilateral issues", Ushakov said.

Last month, Beijing announced that the bilateral trade between China and Russia reached nearly \$147bn last year – more than twice the figure of \$68bn back in 2015 after western sanctions. Last week, senior diplomats from both countries agreed to step up coordination on Asian affairs, in the latest move that signalled even closer ties amid western pressures.

“Both Xi and Putin will underscore (yet again) that their relationship is the best it’s been in history and that the two countries continue to deepen strategic and economic ties, with the subtext being that no amount of US-led efforts to derail their leadership or strategic interests will succeed,” said Shullman.

Prof Sharyl Cross, the director of the Kozmetsky Center at St Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, agreed. “The two leaders will emphasise their burgeoning bilateral security and economic ties and common perspectives on a range of global security issues presenting a challenge to American global influence and the liberal international order,” she said, adding that Xi and Putin were likely to also include discussion of the role of Nato in Europe.

Cross said both Moscow and Beijing would stand to benefit from division among democratic nations and the transatlantic security alliance in responding to the Ukraine conflict. “The United States and its allies should be thinking about how to avoid driving these two major powers closer and ways simultaneous challenges on the part of both Russia and China in different regions (Europe and Asia) might be managed,” she said.

But Shi Yinhong, a professor of international relations at Renmin University in Beijing, downplayed the significance of the forthcoming meeting. He said he did not expect anything new to come out of it.

“China has said what it has said about recent events. Beijing’s statements can be seen as very much pro-Russia, but with some major reservations,” he said. “For example, China has never committed to any military involvement in case of a war. And likewise, despite Putin’s previous support for Beijing’s position on Taiwan, he had never committed to be involved militarily in case of a major conflict [between China and the US], either.”

For Shi, the type of foreign dignitaries that descended in Beijing this week is, instead, more telling about the current state of affairs on the eve of the 50th anniversary of Nixon’s visit to Beijing. These leaders range from Putin to Egypt’s president, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, to the president of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

“From those who diplomatically boycotted the Winter Games and those who came to Beijing, we can see some indication that the world is indeed heading towards the direction of bi-polarisation.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 Ottawa paralyzed; protest tensions grow
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/discover-cool-canada/2022/feb/03/ottawa-protests-tensions-grow-truck-blockade-paralyzes-canada-capital
GIST	<p>For nearly a week, Paul Aubue has lived and slept in the cab of his truck, parked in downtown Ottawa.</p> <p>The 64-year-old grandfather travelled from New Brunswick to join hundreds of others as they descended on the Canadian capital. Aubue, the owner of a trucking company, said he’d been driven to protest by a recent requirement that truckers crossing from the US into Canada be vaccinated against Covid.</p> <p>“I’m here for freedom. This whole thing has been going on for two years and it seems every day there’s something more. We don’t need a vaccine passport,” he said, adding that family had dissuaded him from getting vaccinated. “People die everyday, people born every day – that’s nature.”</p> <p>The vast majority of truckers – and Canadians – are vaccinated against the coronavirus, however. And most Canadians, even though they’ve grown tired of the pandemic, also say they’re against the sustained protests, which have paralyzed central Ottawa and forced businesses to close.</p>

But as tensions rise between protesters and local officials, analysts say the recent events could signal the birth of a growing populist movement which could potentially reshape Canadian politics.

Despite the cold, Aubue said he's been well taken care of by organizers and some residents who oppose public health measures. He says he's received hot meals and fuel to run the truck's generator for heat.

Another protester, Philip Grenier, said he would remain in Ottawa "for as long as it takes" for the federal government to repeal pandemic restrictions – although almost all such rules fall under provincial jurisdiction.

But local people say the protests – which have included honking truck horns, but also allegations of assault and intimidation – have left them frustrated, fed up and – at times – in fear of leaving their homes.

A local woman who gave her name as Jennifer said that she'd been harassed by a group of men wearing Canada flags as capes and shouting "Freedom!" before two other men in an idling truck called her a "dumb cunt sheep" for wearing a mask.

"I'm just done with these people," she said.

When Tim Abray, a communications consultant, attempted to take a picture of the protests, he was confronted by three men who grabbed and shoved him. He said nearby police officers failed to intervene.

Ottawa police chief Peter Sloly called the protests "intolerable and unprecedented", and the force [says](#) it has laid charges against three people and have 25 active investigations into incidents including the desecration of the National War Memorial and the harassment of employees and clients at a soup kitchen.

On Thursday, Justin Trudeau rejected suggestions that the military might be called in to end the protest. "One has to be very, very cautious before deploying military in situations engaging Canadians," he told reporters, adding that a military response was not on the cards "right now".

But Ottawa police say the situation has become increasingly difficult to navigate.

Police say that a number of blockade members are believed to be armed, and amid growing calls for counter protests, there is growing fear that violence could erupt.

Officers say their strategy has been to defuse tensions, but critics say that other demonstrations, including those by Indigenous peoples, are often met with force.

"It's OK if angry white men do it, because they are politically aligned with you, but it's not OK if Indigenous people peacefully protect their own rights," Indigenous lawyer and professor Pam Palmater told APTN News.

The pandemic – and the public health restrictions that came with it – have brought together a number of disparate movements and ideologies, including far-right and separatist groups.

"The pushback to government overreach or public health policies brought QAnon, the Proud Boys and 'sovereign citizens' or anti-government people into the same room," said Amarnath Amarasingam, a researcher into extremism and populism movements at Queen's University. On Thursday, Romana Didulo, the self-proclaimed "Queen of Canada" arrived in Ottawa along with her supporters. Didulo, a QAnon linked conspiracy theorist, was recently arrested after calling on her 70,000 online supporters to shoot health-care workers.

"These groups have proven they can mobilize very quickly and actually get people to give up their lives and go on a trip across the country, which is not an easy thing to do in the middle of winter," said Amarasingam. "But I've been thinking about where all this energy goes when, inevitably, nothing

happens, because their goals are so lofty that they're never going to be met. How do they actually get out of this and save face?"

The group organizing the protest has already raised more than C\$10m online, although the fundraiser was paused by GoFundMe on Wednesday. But members of Trudeau's Liberal party and the Ontario provincial premier are unlikely to meet the protesters' demand for an audience.

But the spectacle has caught the attention of influential far-right voices in the United States, including former president Donald Trump and his son, and Fox News host Tucker Carlson. Tesla founder Elon Musk also tweeted his support of the truck convoy. On Wednesday, Ottawa police said a "significant" amount of the funding and organizing was coming from the United States.

US politics was dramatically reshaped by the [Tea party movement](#) in the 2008s, changing the makeup of Congress and shifting political rhetoric. Canada's electoral system tends to reward more centrist parties, but the recent protest has elevated the profile of previously fringe characters, including those who espouse [Islamophobic](#) and [xenophobic views](#).

With a [vacuum in the Conservative party leadership](#), high-profile members of the party have actively courted the protesters, suggesting they see value in what could be a growing populist movement.

Conservative politicians, including the former party leader, have [posed with protesters](#) outside parliament, in a stunt that Ottawa's mayor [described as](#) an "absolute disgrace".

But the willingness of MP to embrace the protesters speaks to the mainstreaming of more fringe views, say experts.

"They're hedging their bets to see where the political current goes, and how this movement drives broader political and electoral trends. They want to be the ones that ride the fence for as long as possible to decide where their allegiances are in order to keep their jobs," said Amarasingam.

"If Canadian populism becomes this anti-government, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee and racist fringe and if some elected officials feel like that segment of the population is useful, that's going to colour the discourse in terms of how we actually do politics in Canada. That's a larger concern," said Amarasingam. "If it goes the way of the United States, that's just as destructive, even if we don't have somebody in power."

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HEADLINE	02/03 Frackers brace for end of shale boom
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/fracking-oil-prices-shale-boom-11643824329?mod=hp_lead_pos10
GIST	<p>The end of the boom is in sight for America's fracking companies.</p> <p>Less than 3½ years after the shale revolution made the U.S. the world's largest oil producer, companies in the oil fields of Texas, New Mexico and North Dakota have tapped many of their best wells.</p> <p>If the largest shale drillers kept their output roughly flat, as they have during the pandemic, many could continue drilling profitable wells for a decade or two, according to a Wall Street Journal review of inventory data and analyses. If they boosted production 30% a year—the pre-pandemic growth rate in the Permian Basin, the country's biggest oil field—they would run out of prime drilling locations in just a few years.</p> <p>Shale companies once drilled rapidly in pursuit of breakneck growth. Now the industry has little choice but to keep running in place. Many are holding back on increasing production, despite the highest oil prices in years and requests from the White House that they drill more.</p> <p>The limited inventory suggests that the era in which U.S. shale companies could quickly flood the world with oil is receding, and that market power is shifting back to other producers, many overseas. Some</p>

investors and energy executives said concerns about inventory likely motivated a recent spate of acquisitions and will lead to more consolidation.

Some companies say concerns about inventories haven't factored into their decisions to keep output roughly flat. For several years before the pandemic, frustrated investors had pressured companies to slow production growth and [return cash to shareholders](#) rather than pump it back into drilling. Companies have promised to limit spending, though some executives recently said high prices signal a need for them to expand again this year.

U.S. oil production, now at about 11.5 million barrels a day, is still well below its high in early 2020 of about 13 million barrels a day. The Energy Information Administration expects U.S. production to grow about 5.4% through the end of 2022.

Big shale companies already have to drill hundreds of wells each year just to keep production flat. Shale wells produce prodigiously early on, but their production declines rapidly. The Journal [reported in 2019](#) that thousands of shale wells were pumping less oil and gas than companies had forecast. Many have since marked down how many drilling locations they have left.

Some shale companies will eventually have to start spending money to explore for new hot spots, executives and investors said, and even then, those efforts are likely to add only incremental inventory. Few are currently doing so.

Pioneer Natural Resources Co., the largest oil producer in the Permian Basin of West Texas and New Mexico, raised its oil production between 19% and 27% a year in shale's peak years. Now, Pioneer is planning to increase output only 5% a year or lower, for the long term.

Scott Sheffield, chief executive of Pioneer, said the combination of investor pressure and limited well inventory means he cannot drill as he once did. "You just can't keep growing 15% to 20% a year," he said. "You'll drill up your inventories. Even the good companies."

Pioneer bought two smaller drillers last year, Parsley Energy Inc. and DoublePoint Energy, in deals valued at almost \$11 billion combined. Mr. Sheffield said that with those acquisitions, his company has about 15 to 20 years left of inventory. Pioneer's pool of potential drilling locations would last only about eight years at a 15% to 20% growth rate, he said.

While privately held oil producers have increased their output in the Permian this past year, Mr. Sheffield warned even the largest of those would drill through their inventory rapidly if they kept it up.

Mr. Sheffield said he expects U.S. oil production to grow around 2% to 3% a year, even if oil trades from \$70 to \$100 a barrel. U.S. oil prices settled at \$88.26 a barrel Wednesday.

Many drillers say they will never return to pre-pandemic production growth levels of up to 30% a year, in part due to rising costs for raw materials and labor, a lack of available financing and the enormous number of new wells it would require.

Five of the largest shale companies— EOG Resources Inc., Devon Energy Corp., Diamondback Energy Inc., Continental Resources Inc. and Marathon Oil Corp. —all have about a decade or more of profitable well sites at their current drilling pace, according to the Journal's review.

They would exhaust that inventory within about six years if they grew output 15% a year, according to analytics firm FLOW Partners LLC, which provided one of the analyses the Journal reviewed.

The Journal examined information about drilling inventories from analytics firm FLOW; Bernstein Research, part of asset-management company AllianceBernstein LP; and energy consulting firm Rystad Energy. While each of the three made different assumptions, they all pointed to similar limits on inventory.

Some companies disputed they are running low on prime wells, arguing that FLOW had inaccurately labeled some of their better wells as uneconomic, among other reasons. Others said technological advances would allow them to extend the life of their acreage.

For years, frackers told investors they had secured enough drilling spots to keep going for decades. In 2018, Continental, which paved the way for a drilling bonanza in North Dakota's Bakken field, said there could be 65,000 wells drilled there, producing 37 billion barrels of oil.

But to drill all those wells, Rystad said companies will have to explore the region further and improve on existing techniques, and it estimates the region could ultimately yield only as many as 28 billion barrels of oil. Companies have drilled around 18,500 wells in the Bakken and Three Forks formations in North Dakota and Montana, and though high prices may eventually spur exploration, companies have around 16,500 wells left to drill in their existing acreage using proven drilling methods, with less than 3,200 of those considered top-tier, according to Rystad.

Continental didn't respond to requests for comment.

Frackers made a big dent in their inventory as many sought to harvest sweet spots to survive lower oil prices during the pandemic. In recent years, they've also discovered that their projections for how many wells they could cram into tight spaces were overly optimistic.

Companies learned that newer wells drilled too closely to older ones often caused interference with the original wells' oil production or caused new wells to perform worse than expected. They eventually spaced wells farther apart, cutting into estimates of how many they had left to drill.

Since the end of 2016, the number of remaining top-tier drilling locations across five major U.S. oil regions has been cut from more than 68,000 to less than 35,000, Rystad estimates.

In the Bakken and the Eagle Ford shale of South Texas, two early fields that sparked the fracking boom, drillers had already significantly slowed their growth before the pandemic. The pre-pandemic number of rigs had fallen about 77% from its all-time peak in the Bakken and around 70% in the Eagle Ford. Even at reduced paces, producers would sap the Bakken's top-producing wells in less than six years and the Eagle Ford's in less than five, the Rystad analysis showed.

Rystad figures include only the most profitable 25% of each region's remaining inventory. In core areas of the Eagle Ford and Bakken, the most prolific acreage has already been drilled up, Rystad and Bernstein noted.

The Permian is expected to be the longest-lived U.S. oil region and is home to more than 80% of the country's remaining economic drilling locations, according to Wood Mackenzie. The energy consulting firm projects production growth will plateau there by 2025.

One company exploring new places to drill is EOG, the spinoff once known as Enron Oil and Gas and the fourth-largest U.S. oil company by market capitalization. EOG developed some of the earliest shale techniques, pioneering fracking and horizontal drilling to unlock oil from tight rock formations.

EOG is now one of the few companies trying to find new places to frack for oil and gas within the U.S. under new Chief Executive Ezra Yacob. The 45-year-old, who previously led the company's exploration division, said EOG's exploration isn't motivated by concerns about running out of inventory, but rather is constantly looking to increase returns by scouting out the most lucrative drilling locations.

"The cost of supplies, when you move out of those sweet spots, is going to start going up," Mr. Yacob said.

EOG last year said it spent roughly \$300 million on domestic exploration. It hasn't disclosed the locations of its domestic exploration wells.

Tom Loughrey, president of FLOW, estimated EOG has about 12½ years left of inventory if it keeps output roughly flat, but only 4.4 years if it boosted output by 15% a year. EOG disagreed with FLOW's assessment, saying it estimates it has many more economic wells left to drill—about 11,500 so-called premium drilling locations that would last 23 years if it continued at last year's pace.

"EOG is highly confident in our inventory of future drilling locations," spokeswoman Kimberly Ehmer said.

Devon had about 9.2 years left at its current pace, according to FLOW. But that would shrink to about 2.2 years at 15%-per-year growth. That's because once it has drilled its high-return acreage in Permian and Eagle Ford, it would quickly harvest assets in the less productive Powder River Basin of Wyoming and the Stack, in Oklahoma, according to FLOW.

Lisa Adams, a spokeswoman for Devon, said the company's strategy of moderating growth is motivated by its commitment to a disciplined spending plan that will generate higher returns, not concerns about inventory levels. At its current pace, the company has more than 10 years of inventory, she said.

Some analysts believe companies' concerns about shrinking sweet spots motivated a recent spate of multibillion-dollar corporate acquisitions and land sales. In early November, Continental said it would pay about \$3.3 billion for land in the Permian Basin from Pioneer.

Continental executives at the time said the deal wasn't motivated by concerns about inventory. FLOW estimates Continental had about 4.5 years of Bakken inventory left at its current pace. After the Permian deal, the company would have about 11 years remaining. Even with the Permian acquisition, the company's inventory would be exhausted in about three years at 15%-per-year growth, according to FLOW.

The estimate didn't include assets Continental agreed to purchase from Chesapeake Energy Corp. last month in the Powder River Basin, for about \$450 million in cash.

EOG's Mr. Yacob believes his peers will eventually have to invest in risky exploratory drilling. Of the industry's top-tier drilling locations, he said, "They're going pretty fast."

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HEADLINE	02/03 Skagit Co. café owner: WA seized payroll
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3336453/owner-of-billys-cafe-burlington-vows-to-fight-state/
GIST	<p>When Bill DeJong went to pay his employees at Billy's Café in Burlington last month, he suffered a gut punch after opening his bank account.</p> <p>Nearly \$8,700 needed for payroll was gone, DeJong told The Dori Monson Show. It was seized by the Washington State Department of Labor & Industries (L&I) over what the agency says are COVID "safety citations."</p> <p>Over the past few months, DeJong says, L&I slapped him with more than \$367,000 in fines over refusing to adhere to Gov. Inslee's mask mandates. But the café owner objects to what he calls the state's "crazy rules," and says dining at his restaurant is "up to Americans and I am not telling them what to do."</p> <p>"I want to make sure we're clear: When [COVID] first happened, I shut down like everybody else," DeJong said. "I was worried about the safety of my employees, my customers, my family."</p> <p>But after months of following rules that DeJong says were "super confusing – 'wear your mask when you sit down, but then when you get up, but not when you're eating'" — he said his crew decided that "Americans will decide what's best for them and their health," and they dropped the mask mandate.</p>

“I’m totally fine if people don’t want to come in here,” DeJong said. “You have a choice if you want to come into my café, if you want to get something to go, if you want to get it delivered – or if you want to sit down and have a cup of coffee with us.”

That’s when visits from state L&I officers started at the Skagit County business he’s owned since 2014. “They wanted to ‘educate me’ – those were their words,” DeJong said.

But the daily fines accumulated from \$2,000 to now more than \$367,000.

Playing devil’s advocate, Dori asked DeJong if it wouldn’t have just been easier to make dine-in guests wear a mask between the door and the table.

“To the veteran who comes in – who sacrificed a lot more than many of us ever had – to tell him what he can or cannot do, or where he cannot sit, or whether he cannot have a cup of coffee? That is not my café, and that’s not America,” DeJong responded.

“I’m not dumb. I know this is a battle,” he said. “It’s against the state, and it’s not going to be easy, and it’s going to be uphill and it’s going to be tough. ... We are willing to fight this battle.”

“We’re getting a ton of support from other people in Skagit County, and even across the nation now,” he added. “My job now is to let people know what’s going on and fight the good fight.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 Whatcom Co. mayors ask for state help
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3336419/whatcom-county-mayors-letter/
GIST	<p>A group of Whatcom County mayors sent a letter to the State Department of Ecology, Department of Natural Resources, Department of Agriculture, and Department of Natural Resources asking for help managing the effects of extreme weather events.</p> <p>In the letter, the mayors of Ferndale, Blaine, Lynden, Everson, Nooksack, and Sumas described the effects of drought and flooding in their communities — when the Nooksack River has, respectively, either too-high or too-low of water flows.</p> <p>“The problems that the county is facing are twofold — not enough water in the summer, and too much water in the flood event times, usually in the fall or in the spring,” said Lynden Mayor Scott Korthuis in an interview with KIRO Newsradio.</p> <p>The low flows were especially bad during the hot, dry summer of 2021. The letter states that more than “2,500 much needed salmon died in the South Fork of the Nooksack River alone, and ... Fishtap Creek in Lynden was nothing more than a few ponds connected by a mere trickle of water.”</p> <p>The low river levels also led to farmers experiencing crop failures — after they had already lost berries and potatoes to the record heat.</p> <p>“The low instream flows are an issue for the farmers for sufficient irrigation in the summer,” Korthuis explained.</p> <p>On the other side of the coin, high flows in November meant devastating floods for Whatcom County communities, costing people their homes and livestock. Korthuis noted that more two months after the floods, 75% of the homes in Sumas — he estimated at least 500 houses — are still unoccupied because of flood damage.</p>

Korthuis and the other mayors are proposing different forms of water storage as a solution — controlling how much water the river receives, and when. As an example, he suggested a managed aquifer recharge project.

“You pull water out of the river in high flow times and you put it into the ground, maybe a quarter-mile or a half-mile away from the river,” Korthuis explained. “And then that water seeps back into the river over time, so it revitalizes the river in the low-flow times.”

Another solution they propose is putting in dams. While some dams in the state [have received criticism](#) from environmentalists because of the impediment they present to migrating salmon, Korthuis said that dams could be put in areas of the river where salmon do not migrate.

“The North Fork of the Nooksack River has Nooksack Falls — above the falls there are no salmon, because the falls are a significant drop,” Korthuis explained. “So one ideal place to put storage would be upstream on the North Fork of the Nooksack.”

They also suggest adding levees — or widening or raising the current levees — and cleaning sediment off of river banks to give the river more capacity and prevent overflow.

“Your attention is all the more urgent because we are informed by experts that climate change is virtually certain to make these twin problems even worse,” the mayors told the departments in the letter.

Korthuis said that the mayors do not feel that the bill in the Legislature [to add salmon protection buffers](#) on the sides of rivers and streams will help the problem, because it will “take 30,000 productive acres of ag land out of the 60,000 to 70,000 productive acres of ag land.”

The Department of Ecology says it will be meeting with the mayors next week to discuss solutions.

“We received the letter from the Whatcom County mayors and have reached out to talk with them about their concerns in more detail later this month,” the department said in a statement. “We’re committed to working with all of the communities in the Nooksack River Basin on water supply issues, and finding solutions with our partners to improve flood plain management in the area.”

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HEADLINE	02/04 World leaders attending or not Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/sports/olympics/world-leaders-whos-coming-who-isnt-to-beijing-olympics/
GIST	<p>BEIJING (AP) — The U.S., Britain and a handful of others aren’t sending dignitaries to the Beijing Winter Games as part of a diplomatic boycott, but the Chinese capital is still attracting an array of world leaders for Friday’s opening ceremony.</p> <p>A look at who is attending, who is staying away and why:</p> <p>—</p> <p>ATTENDING</p> <p>— RUSSIA: President Vladimir Putin is meeting Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping ahead of the opening ceremony, underscoring closer ties between Beijing and Moscow as they both face Western criticism and pressure.</p> <p>— EGYPT AND SERBIA: Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi and Serbia’s Aleksandar Vucic have growing frictions with the West over their authoritarian policies and human rights records. Both leaders have gravitated toward China. Vucic called Xi his “brother” for supplying Serbia with respirators and vaccines.</p> <p>— SAUDI ARABIA, QATAR, UAE: Beijing’s Gulf relations are above all about energy. China is Saudi Arabia’s largest buyer of oil and a major customer for Qatar’s natural gas. Saudi Crown Prince</p>

Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto leader, is appearing at the Winter Games as investors and some governments signal warming relations after the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

— CENTRAL ASIA: The leaders of all five former Soviet republics in Central Asia are heading to Beijing, highlighting the region's increasingly close ties with China. Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Zhaparov pushed last month for the revival of a long-delayed project to build a railroad from China through his country to Uzbekistan. China is Turkmenistan's only reliable major buyer of natural gas.

— ARGENTINA AND ECUADOR: Argentina is set to become the first major Latin American country to join China's Belt and Road Initiative. President Alberto Fernández is also expected to discuss China's help building Argentina's first nuclear power plant since 1981. President Guillermo Lasso is seeking to renegotiate Ecuador's \$4.6 billion debt with China.

— UNITED NATIONS: Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus will attend. The IOC is a close partner of the U.N., Guterres said, and the Olympics bring together people with a message of solidarity and peace. "This is ... a message that, in my opinion, is more relevant than the political circumstances that exists in the countries where the Olympics take place," he told The Associated Press.

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NOT ATTENDING

— BOYCOTTS: The United States announced a diplomatic boycott while allowing its athletes to compete. Major U.S. allies followed including Britain, Australia and Canada, whose Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said: "We are extremely concerned by the repeated human rights violations by the Chinese government." Kosovo and Lithuania, whose relations with China have nosedived over their ties with Taiwan, are also taking part in the boycott. India said it won't send any officials following reports that a Chinese military commander who was involved in deadly clashes with Indian border forces in 2020 had been chosen as one of the Olympic torchbearers in Beijing.

— NON-BOYCOTTERS: The Norwegian and Swedish royals, who normally attend the Winter Olympics, aren't going. Neither are any leaders from Germany, Austria or Switzerland, all big winter sports nations. Officially they're citing the pandemic, rather than any diplomatic protest. Others such as Denmark, the Netherlands and New Zealand have cited COVID-19 restrictions while also expressing concern over China's human rights situation.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Fire Marshal Interchange: free resource
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/emergency-preparedness/the-fire-marshal-interchange-a-free-resource-for-information-sharing/
GIST	<p>The Fire Marshal Interchange (FMI) is a free, secure and easy-to-access means of communications between fire marshal offices. The FMI gives fire marshals from across the United States and around the world the opportunity to share knowledge outside their jurisdictions.</p> <p>Why you should join</p> <p>If you're a fire marshal and not using the FMI, you're missing out on the opportunity to share lessons learned and to access information about problems and trends that threaten lives in your community.</p> <p>By joining the FMI, you could learn about a dangerous product or activity and address it before it causes problems or injuries in your area. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sprinkler systems. Does your state or community require sprinklers in all new homes? Should they? If you think the rules in your state or community should be changed, the FMI can be a source of invaluable information to support your position.• Graffiti. Is there a relationship between graffiti and arson? Information from other fire marshals could shed light on relationships like this that could assist you in protecting your community, including identifying arsonists that move from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

- Burn patterns. Interested in getting some additional expert feedback on burn patterns for a current investigation? With the FMI, you can easily access the years of experience of a group of peers highly trained in inspection, investigation and prevention.
- Sky lanterns. Sky lanterns are small paper or plastic balloons sent aloft by a flaming object. They are illegal in many states and communities. Are they legal in yours? Should they be? Information from the FMI can help you make decisions on, and provide support materials for, the action you decide to take.

These are just a few random examples of the type of information posted on the FMI that can help you protect your community. By joining today, you can start building relationships with other fire marshals and take advantage of the many features offered by the FMI that will help you position yourself as a leader and enhance your performance as a fire marshal.

FMI features

To encourage interaction with other like-minded professionals and provide actionable resources, the FMI includes:

- Discussion boards for sharing information (organized in categories for requesting information, sharing information and general discussion).
- Reference libraries for sharing documents (organized in topical categories, such as fire investigations, legislation, code enforcement and community risk reduction).
- A multimedia section for sharing photos and videos.
- A contact list for fire marshals nationwide.
- Training resource links.
- A training and resource list calendar.

You can even set up alerts on the FMI so you will know when certain people post or when information on specific topics is posted.

Worldwide reach

Through internationally-based fire marshals and Department of Defense (DOD) members, the FMI reaches beyond the borders of the United States with DOD fire marshals as close as Canada and as far away as New Zealand. Although most participation comes from the United States, input from around the world offers a different perspective to help identify trends and best practices when confronted with significant life safety concerns.

How to join your fire marshal colleagues on the FMI

The FMI website resides on the Homeland Security Information Network (HSIN).

Registered (active) HSIN users:

Email your request to join the FMI to [Bruce Bouch](#).

New HSIN users

1. Email a request to join the FMI from your assigned (work-related) government email account to [Bruce Bouch](#).
2. We will email you an invitation. Follow the instructions in the invitation.
3. After we vet you into the HSIN, we will notify you of your access to the FMI

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[Read more at U.S. Fire Administration](#)

HEADLINE	02/03 WWII 'Ghost Army' finally wins recognition
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/us/ghost-army-world-war-2.html
GIST	<p>The Ghost Army had one goal: Deceive Hitler's forces and their allies.</p> <p>Credited with fine-tuning the ancient art of deceptive warfare, the American military units of the Ghost Army used inflatable tanks and trucks to cloak the true size and location of American forces. They played</p>

ear-piercingly loud recorded sounds to mimic troop movement. They sent out misleading radio communications to scramble German intelligence.

The objective was to trick the Germans into thinking the Allies were in the neighborhood in force, so that actual units elsewhere had time to maneuver.

The Ghost Army, described as “a traveling roadshow of deception,” was composed of engineers and artists, designers and architects, radio operators and truck drivers. The work was so secretive that group members, who are credited with saving thousands of Allied lives, were unsung heroes for several decades after the war. But a grassroots effort in recent years culminated this week in [the ultimate recognition](#) from the U.S. government.

On Tuesday, President Biden [signed a bill](#) that grants the Congressional Gold Medal — Congress’s equivalent of the Presidential Medal of Freedom — to members of the Ghost Army for “their unique and highly distinguished service in conducting deception operations” during World War II.

“Through their courageous, creative and innovative tactics, the top-secret Ghost Army outmaneuvered and deceived the Nazis, saving thousands of Allied lives during World War II,” Representative Annie Kuster, Democrat of New Hampshire, who sponsored the legislation, [said in a statement](#). “More than 75 years after defeating fascism in Europe, it’s time these soldiers receive the highest honor we can award: the Congressional Gold Medal.”

Bernie Bluestein, of Schaumburg, Ill., is one of only 10 known surviving members of the Ghost Army, an unofficial term for the two U.S. Army units involved in the subterfuge. The 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, Mr. Bluestein’s unit, carried out more than 20 deception campaigns close to the front, including in France and Germany. A sister unit, the 3133rd Signal Company Special, executed two campaigns in Italy in 1945.

In an interview on Tuesday night, Mr. Bluestein, 98, said the award gave him an indescribable feeling of satisfaction, but he expressed sadness that so few veterans were alive to enjoy the honor with him. The other surviving members of the group range in age from 97 to 99.

“Something we did was appreciated by so many people and at the time we didn’t realize that,” Mr. Bluestein said. “It’s really a great feeling to have people acknowledge that I had a job to do in the service and it was helpful in our winning the war.”

In one of the 23rd’s most elaborate feats of trickery, during the critical Rhine River campaign to finally crush Germany, the unit set up 10 miles south of the spot where two American Ninth Army divisions were to cross the river. To draw attention away from the actual divisions, the Ghost Army conjured up a decoy force of inflated tanks, cannons, planes and trucks; sent out misleading radio messages about the American troops’ movements; and used loudspeakers to simulate the sound of soldiers building pontoon boats.

The Germans fell for the ruse. They fired on the 23rd’s divisions, while Ninth Army troops crossed the Rhine with nominal resistance.

During that campaign, Mr. Bluestein and other soldiers would visit bars and gathering spots and pretend to be senior officers to create scuttlebutt among the locals that the Americans were up to something. The hope was that German spies would eventually be misdirected.

But Mr. Bluestein was an artist at heart. Before the unit began using inflatable tanks, he would paint on cloth draped over wooden tanks to make them look authentic. He stenciled insignia for 23rd members, and he produced posters to distribute around towns — anything to create an authentic flourish.

“Like, Coca-Cola signs, so they’ll say, ‘Oh, yeah, the Americans are here,’” Mr. Bluestein said.

Mr. Bluestein had a long career after the war as an industrial designer for companies that made household appliances like refrigerators and toasters, but in retirement he found himself embracing art again. These days, his favorite objects to sculpt are pins and needles, a tribute to his father, a tailor, and his mother, a seamstress.

About half of the soldiers in Mr. Bluestein's unit, the 603rd Camouflage Engineer Battalion, were artists, said Rick Beyer, a documentarian who [has chronicled the story](#) of the Ghost Army and pushed for the gold medal.

The Army took existing units and "mashed them together, Frankenstein style," to create the 23rd, he said, but it also recruited from art schools like the Cleveland Institute of Art and the Cooper Union. Some members became famous after the war, like the fashion designer Bill Blass and the painter Ellsworth Kelly.

In addition to Mr. Bluestein, the other nine surviving members of the Ghost Army are Bill Anderson, 97, of Kent, Ohio; James T. Anderson, 99, of Dover, Del.; John Christman, 97, of Leesburg, N.J.; George Dramis, 97, of Raleigh, N.C.; Manny Frockt, 97, of West Palm Beach, Fla.; Nick Leo, 99, of Brentwood, N.Y.; Mark Mallardi, 98, of Edgewater, Fla.; Bill Nall, 97, of Dunellon, Fla.; and Seymour Nussenbaum, 98, of Monroe Township, N.J.

Mr. Beyer, who produced [a 2013 documentary](#) that aired on PBS about the Ghost Army and later [co-wrote a book](#) with Elizabeth Sayles, "The Ghost Army of World War II," said the effort to bestow a Congressional Gold Medal on the group was the product of a grassroots campaign that required two-thirds of each congressional chamber to co-sponsor the legislation.

"We had to convince literally 350 congressional offices, one by one, of doing this," Mr. Beyer said. The end result was a rare bipartisan feat at a time of intense partisan rancor. "Sometimes, it's good to take a breath and say maybe there are some things we don't have to be completely cynical about," he said.

"The Ghost Army in some ways is still helping to keep our country safe," Mr. Beyer said, "because people are still studying what they did and are learning from it and use it today."

Although warfare has evolved since then, and advanced reconnaissance technology makes fooling enemy forces with inflatable tanks a bigger challenge, the principles and innovation of the Ghost Army live on today in the work of soldiers who practice psychological operations, Gen. Edward G. Burley, a retired Army brigadier general who commanded the Joint Psychological Operations Task Force in Iraq, said in an interview.

General Burley said soldiers today are taught about the imagination employed by the Ghost Army to "think outside the box" to make military deception more believable.

"These are giants, and we're standing on their shoulders," he said. "Their techniques are still being used today. We're just adding additional elements to adjust for technology."

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HEADLINE	02/03 Mystery coronavirus signal in NYC sewage
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/health/coronavirus-wastewater-new-york.html
GIST	<p>Last January, a team of researchers searching for the coronavirus in New York City's wastewater spotted something strange in their samples. The viral fragments they found had a unique constellation of mutations that had never been reported before in human patients — a potential sign of a new, previously undetected variant.</p> <p>For the past year, these oddball sequences, or what the scientists call "cryptic lineages," have continued to pop up in the city's wastewater.</p>

There is no evidence that the lineages, which have been circulating for at least a year without overtaking Delta or Omicron, pose an elevated health risk to humans. But the researchers, whose findings [will be published](#) in Nature Communications on Thursday, still have no idea where they came from.

“At this point, what we can say is that we haven’t found the cryptic lineages in human databases, and we have looked all over,” said Monica Trujillo, a microbiologist at Queensborough Community College and an author of the new paper.

The researchers themselves are torn about the lineages’ origins. Some lean toward the explanation that the virus is coming from people whose infections aren’t being captured by sequencing. But others suspect that the lineages may be coming from virus-infected animals, possibly the city’s enormous population of rats. Even then, the favored theory can change from day-to-day or hour-to-hour.

Answers remain elusive.

“I think it’s really important that we find the source, and we have not been able to pin that down,” said John Dennehy, a virologist at Queens College and an author of the paper.

Strange sequences

The researchers — who also include Marc Johnson, a virologist at the University of Missouri, Davida Smyth, a microbiologist at Texas A&M University and others — have been sampling wastewater from 14 treatment plants in New York City since June 2020. In January of 2021, they began doing targeted sequencing of the samples, focusing on part of the gene for the virus’s all-important spike protein.

Although this approach provides a limited look at the viral genome, it allows researchers to extract a lot of data from wastewater, in which the virus is typically fragmented.

Viral fragments with novel patterns of mutations appeared repeatedly at a handful of treatment plants, the researchers found. (They could not disclose the specific plants or areas of the city, they said.)

“To date we have not seen these variants among clinical patients in N.Y.C.,” said Michael Lanza, a spokesman for New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley have found similar sequences in one California sewershed, said Rose Kantor, a microbiologist at the university.

The scientists’ continuing quest to figure out where the sequences are coming from highlights both the potential of wastewater surveillance, which can help scientists keep tabs on how the virus is evolving, and the challenge of making sense of any anomalies pulled out of the murk.

“We really struggled trying to understand what it was that we had,” Dr. Trujillo said.

The lineages could be coming from people whose infections have escaped detection or whose virus has not been sequenced.

But the fact that they kept turning up at the same few wastewater plants makes this theory less likely, the researchers said, given that New Yorkers, and any variants they may be carrying, tend to move throughout the city without restriction.

Still, Dr. Dennehy speculated that the sequences could be coming from people who are confined to long-term health care facilities in just a few areas of the city. But he has not been able to prove it.

“We were able to pin it down to a very small area of the sewershed,” Dr. Dennehy said. “And I emailed doctors and hospitals in those areas and never once got a response to my emails.”

Indeed, people who have compromised immune systems may have more difficulty fighting off the virus, giving it more opportunities to mutate. Many scientists theorize that Omicron emerged from an immunocompromised patient.

Intriguingly, some of the cryptic lineages have some of the same mutations as Omicron, or mutations in the same locations. Laboratory experiments suggest that these lineages may also be able to evade some antibodies.

The New York City lineages might be a result of the same kind of selective pressure to evade some of the body's immune defenses, the researchers theorize.

On the other hand, the lineages have been circulating for long enough now that they should have appeared in at least one sample sequenced from an infected person, some scientists said.

"To have something in a sewer shed that you're detecting, you need a fair bit of it around," said Dr. Adam Lauring, a virologist at the University of Michigan, who was not involved in the research.

Dr. Johnson, the Missouri virologist, agrees. He favors the hypothesis that the sequences are coming from animals, perhaps a few specific populations with limited territories. In May and June of 2021, when the number of human Covid-19 cases in the city was low, the mysterious lineages made up a greater proportion of the viral RNA in wastewater, suggesting that they may have come from a nonhuman source.

The researchers initially considered a diverse array of potential hosts, from squirrels to skunks. "This is a very promiscuous virus," Dr. Johnson said. "It can infect all kinds of species."

To narrow down the possibilities, they went back to the wastewater, assuming that any animal that was shedding virus might be leaving its own genetic material behind, too.

Although a vast majority of the genetic material in the water came from humans, small amounts of RNA from dogs, cats and rats were also present, the scientists found.

Dr. Johnson has been considering rats, which roam the city by the millions. In his lab, he created pseudoviruses — harmless, nonreplicating viruses — with the same mutations present in the cryptic sequences. The pseudoviruses were able to infect both mouse and rat cells, he found. The original version of the virus does not appear able to infect rodents, although some other variants, like Beta, can.

"So in and of itself, that isn't huge data, but it is at least consistent with the idea that it's coming from rodents," Dr. Johnson said.

Since last summer, the scientists have been working with Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture to look for signs of the virus in blood and fecal samples from local rats. So far, they've come up empty.

"Maybe we're not hitting the right animals," Dr. Dennehy said.

Or maybe rats aren't the source of the mystery lineages. Scientists have repeatedly found that human can pass the virus to animals, especially pets, zoo animals, farmed mink and others with which they are in frequent contact. That has raised concerns that the virus might establish itself in an animal reservoir, where it might mutate and get passed back to humans.

But rats have not typically been high on the list of concern, and there has not been any evidence that the virus is circulating in wild rats. The pathway by which humans could have infected rats is also unknown. "Nothing makes perfect sense," Dr. Johnson said.

But some kind of animal origin remains a possibility, scientists said.

	<p>“It’s just as plausible, if not more plausible, than a human origin,” Dr. Luring said.</p> <p>So the search continues. Dr. Johnson has developed a new technique that can amplify only non-Omicron sequences, which should make it easier to detect the lineages. He has also begun searching for similar lineages in sewage samples from other states, which might help provide further clues to their origins.</p> <p>“We will know eventually,” Dr. Johnson said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Turkey, wavering NATO ally, backs Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/world/europe/ukraine-turkey-russia-drones.html
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine — President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey agreed on Thursday to expand supplies of one of the Ukrainian Army’s most sophisticated weapons, a long-range, Turkish-made armed drone whose use in combat for the first time in Ukraine last fall infuriated Russian officials.</p> <p>Mr. Erdogan’s decision to provide weapons and diplomatically back Ukraine was a public rebuke to Moscow and another complicating factor in the mix of cooperation and conflict between Turkey and Russia, historical rivals for supremacy in the region around the Black Sea.</p> <p>The promise of more arms for Ukraine, especially an offensive weapon like the Turkish drone, is an extremely sensitive issue for Moscow, which claims that its security is threatened and that it has no choice but to mass troops on the Ukrainian border. The Ukrainians, while welcoming diplomatic support, have said that what they primarily need are more weapons to deter any attack.</p> <p>The Turkish leader’s visit to Ukraine’s capital, Kyiv, to announce the arms deal came as diplomatic dividing lines are being drawn in the crisis, with the United States, Britain and Eastern European nations sending weaponry to bolster Ukraine in the event of war with Russia. An American airlift of anti-tank missiles and small-arms ammunition continued Thursday with the arrival of a seventh cargo jet of weaponry to Kyiv.</p> <p>At the same time, Russia denounced the Biden administration’s announcement that it would send additional troops to NATO countries, with the Kremlin spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, accusing the United States of “igniting tensions on the European continent.” Russia’s defense minister, Sergei K. Shoigu, said Thursday that the Russian military would send additional troops and equipment for military exercises in Belarus, which borders Ukraine to the north, adding to tens of thousands of soldiers already deployed there.</p> <p>President Emmanuel Macron of France pressed a diplomatic effort in separate phone calls with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine. The calls are intended to lead to a summit of Russian, Ukrainian and European leaders to help defuse the threat of a Russian military incursion.</p> <p>Mr. Erdogan’s visit to Kyiv was mostly a show of support for Mr. Zelensky’s government, but the Turkish leader also offered to play a mediating role between Russia and Ukraine, showing he is walking a fine line between backing Ukraine and disrupting a complicated relationship with Russia.</p> <p>“We are ready to fulfill our part to end the crisis between two friendly countries that Turkey neighbors across the Black Sea.” So far, neither government has taken him up on the idea.</p> <p>Turkey is a member of NATO but also maintains economic and military industry ties with Russia. And the two countries are also on opposing sides in two Middle Eastern wars, in Syria and Libya, and in the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the South Caucasus region.</p>

Mr. Erdogan said Thursday that he wanted to “lower the tensions instead of adding fuel to the flames” of the conflict, but did not back away from the deal to provide arms to Ukraine, which was first negotiated in 2019 and expanded with a new accord on Thursday.

Turkey has sold Ukraine armed, Bayraktar TB2 drones that the Ukrainian military used for the first time in combat in the war with Russian-backed separatists last October. The drone destroyed a separatist howitzer from miles away, surprising the separatists.

The missile strike suggested a tipping of the military balance in the eastern Ukraine war using a NATO-provided weapon, angering Russia. Mr. Putin mentioned the drone attack last fall in speeches when pressing his case that Russia’s security was threatened.

And in December, Mr. Putin protested the drone sales directly in a telephone call with Mr. Erdogan, saying the Ukrainians’ use of Turkish armed drones was “destructive” and “provocative activity,” according to a Kremlin readout of the call.

Ukraine’s minister of defense, Aleksei Reznikov, said Thursday that Turkey had agreed to localize production of the drone at a factory outside of Kyiv. The Ukrainian version of the Bayraktar will fly with a domestically made engine. Turkey would also buy some drones of this model for its own armed forces, Mr. Reznikov said.

The site would also become a training center for Ukrainian drone pilots, Mr. Reznikov said.

Mr. Zelensky praised the drone deal, which was a clear snub to Russia’s yearslong objections to Ukraine obtaining the Turkish drone technology and its urgent demands last fall that NATO countries cease arming Ukraine.

“This is new technology, new jobs and a strengthening of the defensive capabilities of Ukraine,” Mr. Zelensky said.

Earlier Thursday, in a bid to reassure Moscow, the Turkish defense minister, Hulusi Akar, stressed Ankara’s commitment to a treaty that restricts NATO forces’ access to the Black Sea through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which Turkey controls. The accord, the Montreux Convention, prohibits aircraft carriers from crossing the straits and limits other warships to short voyages in the Black Sea. In 2014, during a conflict in Georgia when Washington was seeking to deter Russian military action, Turkey refused to let American warships into the Black Sea.

Mr. Erdogan has military deals with Ukraine and Russia, including the purchase of a Russian air defense system that drew criticism from fellow NATO members. That system, called the S-400, put Russian technology inside the territory of a key Western ally; American officials were deeply angered by the move.

But on Thursday, the commitment to arm Ukraine at a moment of threatened war with Russia sent an unambiguous signal, as did the martial-themed reception Mr. Erdogan received in Kyiv.

During the visit, Mr. Erdogan stood at attention to observe an elaborate parade by a Ukrainian military honor guard and brass band on the grounds of the Tsarist-era Mariinsky Palace in Kyiv, used for formal visits.

When it was over, Mr. Erdogan greeted the soldiers with a phrase in Ukrainian that is associated with the country’s post-2014 struggles with Russia, another, though symbolic, sign of taking sides in the conflict.

“Glory to Ukraine!” Mr. Erdogan said. The soldiers shouted back, “Glory to its heroes!”

Turkey and Ukraine also signed a deal intended to increase trade between the two countries to \$10 billion from about \$7 billion now. The countries also signed agreements to deepen cooperation between their respective police forces and an agreement on closer coordination between their ministries of defense.

	<p>The seven American cargo jets have carried a total of about 600 tons of military assistance so far including anti-tank weapons and small-arms ammunition.</p> <p>The shipments included additional Javelin anti-tank missiles, which the United States has provided since 2018. Britain has airlifted about 2,000 light anti-tank missiles, known as NLAWs, to Ukraine in the past two weeks.</p> <p>With approval from the United States, the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, said they would transfer more Javelin anti-tank missiles and Stinger antiaircraft missiles, plugging some holes in Ukraine's shoddy air defenses. Poland has also said it will send antiaircraft missiles.</p> <p>The shipments may have reached an important tipping point, Andriy Zahorodniuk, a former Ukrainian minister of defense, said in an interview Thursday. With the additional British and American supplies, Ukraine now has more anti-tank missiles than Russia has operational main battle tanks in its military, he said, though Russia's total including tanks in reserve is still larger.</p> <p>Ukraine, he said, does not have to reach a so-called "capability parity" with the Russian Army — an impossibility in any case — to deter a military intervention, he said.</p> <p>"Invading somebody's territory is much more difficult than defending," he said. "The task in defending is to cause such a high level of casualties that it becomes unbearable."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Deepening crisis engulfs British PM
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/world/europe/top-aides-boris-johnson-quit.html
GIST	<p>LONDON — An exodus of senior officials from 10 Downing Street on Thursday deepened the crisis engulfing Prime Minister Boris Johnson, as he fought to hold on to power in the wake of a scandal over get-togethers that breached lockdown restrictions.</p> <p>Mr. Johnson's chief of staff, private secretary, communications chief, and head of policy all resigned, leaving the top of British government rudderless at a time when Mr. Johnson is struggling to avert a mutiny in the ranks of his Conservative Party. About a dozen party lawmakers have called publicly for a no-confidence vote in the prime minister.</p> <p>Some of the departures fulfilled Mr. Johnson's promise to overhaul the Downing Street operation, following the release of a government report on Monday that criticized the office for "excessive" workplace drinking, citing 16 social gatherings — some of them now under police investigation — during periods when England was under strict lockdowns.</p> <p>But the resignation of his policy chief, Munira Mirza, carried an extra sting. One of his longest-serving and most influential aides, Ms. Mirza sent the prime minister a sharply critical letter in which she said he made a "scurrilous accusation" against the leader of the opposition Labour Party, Keir Starmer.</p> <p>That referred to claims Mr. Johnson had made in Parliament on Monday, linking Mr. Starmer, who is a former chief public prosecutor, to a failure to bring charges against Jimmy Savile, a popular television personality who died in 2011, having never been tried for a string of sex offenses that later came to light.</p> <p>Mr. Starmer was not involved in the case and later ordered an inquiry into the failure of his department to take action. Following the exchange in Parliament on Monday, Mr. Johnson modified his comments, but Ms. Mirza said that the prime minister's clarification, made on Thursday, fell short of a full apology.</p> <p>"Even now," she wrote, "I hope you find it in yourself to apologize for a grave error of judgment made under huge pressure."</p>

Mr. Johnson's claim also drew criticism from the chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, whose words are being closely scrutinized because he is viewed as a potential candidate to replace Mr. Johnson as Conservative leader and prime minister if he is ousted.

"Being honest, I wouldn't have said it, and I am glad that the prime minister clarified what he meant," Mr. Sunak said at a news conference where he announced plans to try to cushion the blow of steep increases in household energy bills.

The departures of the chief of staff, Dan Rosenfeld, and the principal private secretary, Martin Reynolds, were not as unexpected as Ms. Mirza's. Critics have faulted Mr. Rosenfeld for his management of Downing Street, while Mr. Reynolds sent an email inviting nearly 100 staff members to a B.Y.O.B. garden party at a time when the government's own lockdown rules prohibited people from gathering with more than one person outside their families.

The departure of the communications director, Jack Doyle, was also less of a surprise, as his name was linked with some of the parties now under investigation by the police. Critics also faulted him for Downing Street's steadfast original denials that such gatherings took place and for its insistence that all the Covid rules had been complied with.

Still, the timing of Mr. Doyle's resignation was unfortunate for Mr. Johnson, heightening the sense of a political unraveling. Yet for all the disarray inside Downing Street, the departures may not have a practical effect on Mr. Johnson's grip on his job.

He can only be forced out if 54 Conservative lawmakers submit letters calling for a no-confidence vote, and then in that vote, a majority of Tory lawmakers in Parliament cast a ballot against him. The letters are confidential, and the number submitted remains a closely guarded secret.

But on Wednesday, three more Conservative lawmakers openly called on the prime minister to step down, bringing the total who have gone public to around a dozen.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Year of Tiger overshadows Olympic panda
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/02/sports/olympics/lunar-new-year-olympics.html
GIST	<p>Parks and avenues in Beijing are lined with red Lunar New Year lanterns. Streets are deserted as families gather at home to celebrate the Year of the Tiger. The five-ring symbol of the Olympics and the cuddly panda mascot of the Winter Games are hardly to be seen.</p> <p>Winter sports lovers around the globe are turning their eyes toward Beijing as the Winter Olympics begin on Friday. But in the Chinese capital itself, outside the "closed loop" bubble for participants, there are few signs of an Olympic fever.</p> <p>The biggest reason seems to be the time of year. The arrival of the Lunar New Year was celebrated in China on Monday night. The entire week, through Sunday, is a national holiday in mainland China. Many stores, restaurants and other public areas are closed.</p> <p>Pandemic precautions are another reason for the silence in Beijing. Before the pandemic, an influx of tour groups from the country's hinterland poured into the capital each winter during the holiday. Not this year.</p> <p>Most tourism across provincial borders has been banned in China this winter to prevent spreading the coronavirus. The city of Beijing has been strict about prohibiting out-of-town tour groups.</p> <p>But traveling home is still allowed. Many Chinese did not return to their hometowns the previous two Lunar New Years, when coronavirus vaccines were not widely available, but they are heading back this year. Data from the Ministry of Transport shows that long-haul holiday travel in the two weeks preceding Lunar New Year rose by half compared with the same period in 2021.</p>

	<p>Beijing residents who have not left town have limited options for going out. The local authorities are telling groups booking restaurants or other venues during the next few weeks that they must accept a vaguely defined legal responsibility if anyone at their event is infected with the coronavirus.</p> <p>Still, there are some indications in Beijing that the Olympics are underway. Special lanes have been marked on highways for Olympic vehicles. Some signs have been placed on roadsides and buses. In Zhangjiakou, an area near Beijing that will host outdoor events like cross-country skiing, streets have been decorated with Olympic signs.</p> <p>The muted approach is nonetheless a big contrast to the 2008 Summer Olympics, which were held in August and prompted residents to flood sunny sidewalks and cheer on the Games.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Calif. snowpack plummets after dry January
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/us/california-snowpack.html
GIST	<p>For anyone tracking the state of California’s drought, the past four months have delivered an emotional whiplash.</p> <p>October brought flooding and atmospheric rivers. November was unusually parched.</p> <p>December broke rainfall records, while January clocked in as the driest ever for large swaths of the state. The wild swings in precipitation mean that much of the water gains from recent storms are slipping away sooner than any of us would like.</p> <p>By the end of our extremely wet December, the state’s snowpack, an important source of water, had reached 160 percent of its expected level, a cause for celebration in the midst of a drought.</p> <p>But by Wednesday, just over a month later, the snowpack had shrunk to 90 percent of its historical level, according to state data.</p> <p>“That one dry month of January basically wiped out whatever head start we had as we head towards the end of winter,” Sean de Guzman, manager of the snow surveys and water supply forecasting section of the California Department of Water Resources, told The Associated Press this week.</p> <p>There are two factors at play here. The snowpack is probably melting because of unseasonably warm temperatures. And because January is typically one of the wettest months in California, the historical average is higher now than it was in December.</p> <p>Here’s another way to think about this: California gets most of its rain between November and March, with January and February typically being the rainiest months.</p> <p>So missing out on storms in January — and February, as is projected for at least the first two weeks of the month — takes an especially big toll on California’s water supplies.</p> <p>And, unfortunately, the dry streaks we’ve been experiencing don’t appear to be a fluke.</p> <p>While the total precipitation California receives each year is unlikely to change significantly this century, the state is projected to experience longer dry seasons and shorter, but more intense, wet seasons because of the effects of global warming, experts say.</p> <p>Take what happened in October. Sacramento logged its wettest day ever eight days after it broke a very different kind of record — the longest dry spell in the city’s history, with 212 days without rain.</p>

	<p>Scientists call these rapid shifts from extreme dry to extreme wet conditions “precipitation whiplash.” By the end of the century, they’re expected to increase in frequency by 25 percent in Northern California and to double in Southern California, according to a 2018 study in the journal Nature Climate Change.</p> <p>So we might as well get used to these unpredictable weather patterns.</p> <p>Still, there’s some good news: Even with a dry November, California received more rainfall in the final quarter of 2021 than it had over the previous 12 months.</p> <p>Before October, 88 percent of California was considered in extreme or exceptional drought, the most severe designations, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.</p> <p>Now, 1 percent of the state falls into those categories.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 ISIS leader dead but organization still lurks
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/03/islamic-states-head-may-be-dead-but-its-body-still-shows-signs-of-life
GIST	<p>Being an Islamic State leader is not what it used to be. The death of the latest IS supremo, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, far from the heartland of the terror group’s rise in Iraq in a frugal home in the back blocks of Syria, is another painful blow to an organisation that only five years ago held significant territory in both countries and cast a shadow across an entire region.</p> <p>Its slide ever since has been dramatic. Unable to hold land, its old guard wiped out, its finances shredded and rank and file depleted, IS looks – at face value – like a group that has had its day. And yet it still lurks amid the rubble of both countries, where it is slowly yet assuredly stirring.</p> <p>To many who study IS, a prison break last month in north-eastern Syria looked to be a sign of things to come. Dozens of extremists were able to plan and gather in the heart of one of the biggest cities in the country’s north-east and launch an audacious bid to free the up to 2,000 men inside. The battle to reclaim the prison raged for six days and, while it was eventually returned to the control of the Kurdish forces who run the province, the gap between disaster and triumph was narrow.</p> <p>The fighting was the first time since IS capitulated in the far eastern Syrian town of Baghuz in March 2019 that the remnants of the organisation had revealed itself en masse. That it could still stage a large operation in a major centre was a surprise to some – but not to Kurdish leaders, who had warned of this day since inheriting thousands of prisoners from the IS era and tens of thousands more of family members from towns and villages on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border.</p> <p>A journey though what was formerly a centre of IS’s self-proclaimed caliphate late last year revealed broken, impoverished communities still unreconciled after nearly a decade of upheaval. On the Iraqi side of the Euphrates River, in Anbar, the grievances date back nearly a decade more to the ousting of Saddam Hussein in the 2003 US-led invasion.</p> <p>A common theme in both countries remains that Sunni Muslims remain largely excluded from a flatlining political process and an ascendant regional push by the smaller Shia sect. Without Sunnis being able to meaningfully shape their outcomes while watching political rivals cement their gains, IS’s message of restoring lost glories and dignities will remain potent for some – just as it was when the terrorist juggernaut first gained steam.</p> <p>It is consequently still active. In Deir Azzour province, the anti-IS coalition is carrying out raids against IS targets most days. Further west in Rojava, Kurdish counter-terrorism forces are also busy trying to weed out sleeper cells and ward off hit-and-run attacks – the type of low-intensity insurgency that the group used so effectively in Iraq from 2004 to 2011. Except, this time it can carry out such attacks on both sides of the river.</p>

The risk of an escalation with a large number of prisoners and potential sympathisers in detention camps remains high. Kurdish leaders in Syria have been warning of the immense dangers in allowing thousands of IS men and families to gather on their soil and have urged the US and Europe to help find a solution.

The ghosts of Camp Bucca in Iraq, the US post-invasion detention centre that acted as a an academy for the forerunners of IS, looms large in Kurdish thinking. Qurayshi was an alumnus, so too was his predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, his anointed successor, Abu Hassan al-Muhajir, and the IS number two, Sami Jassem, who was arrested in Idlib last year and handed over to Iraqi forces.

All four leaders had chosen Idlib as a refuge. With so many itinerants passing through and nondescript homes to hide in, many of the group's most committed members now call it home. Its role as a new ground zero, so close to Turkey, has sounded a new alarm. Even more disturbing though would be to ignore the menace gathering in the shadows elsewhere in Syria.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Biggest one-day loss in history for a company
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/feb/03/facebook-stock-shares-meta-mark-zuckerberg
GIST	<p>A historic plunge in the stock price of Facebook's parent company has erased more than \$230bn in its market value, easily the biggest one-day loss in history for a US company.</p> <p>The 26.4% wipeout in Meta comes amid concerns about its future after the company reported its first ever drop in daily user numbers in its Wednesday earnings report. Facebook rebranded to Meta last year as part of its strategic pivot to becoming a virtual-reality based company. The company's advertising model has also been hit hard by privacy changes at Apple, which Facebook has said it expects will cost them billions.</p> <p>The slump in stock price has sent Mark Zuckerberg's personal wealth tumbling by nearly \$30bn. Meta's stock fall marked the biggest slide in market value for a US public company, according to a Reuters analysis of Refinitiv data.</p> <p>It was a disappointment for a company that investors have become accustomed to delivering spectacular growth. Meta also reported a rare decline in profit due to a sharp increase in expenses as it invests in the "metaverse".</p> <p>"Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg may be keen to coax the world into an alternate reality, but disappointing fourth-quarter results were quick to burst his metaverse bubble," said Laura Hoy, an equity analyst at Hargreaves Lansdown.</p> <p>On a Wednesday call with investors, Zuckerberg said he was "proud" of the work the company had done last year but acknowledged the company faced tough competition for attention from rivals including TikTok.</p> <p>The fall of Meta's stock helped yank other tech stocks lower on Wall Street on Thursday, abruptly ending a four-day winning streak for the market. The stocks of other social media companies including Twitter and Snap also fell.</p> <p>Spotify also slumped 16.8% after the leading music-streaming service gave investors a weak forecast for a closely watched measure of its earnings. The company has come under pressure after Neil Young pulled his music from its platform to protest the spreading of Covid misinformation by Spotify's star podcaster, Joe Rogan.</p> <p>Big US tech-focused companies have come under mounting pressure in 2022 as investors expect policy tightening at the US Federal Reserve to erode the industry's rich valuations following years of ultra-low interest rates. The Nasdaq, which is dominated by tech and other growth stocks, fell more than 9% in January, its worst monthly drop since the coronavirus-induced market crash in March 2020.</p>

	<p>“The downgrade in the earnings outlook by Meta and other companies took markets by surprise,” said Kenneth Broux, a strategist at Societe Generale in London.</p> <p>“The tech selloff spilled over to broader equity markets this morning and with the Fed preparing to raise interest rates, we could see more volatility going forward,” he said.</p> <p>With big tech firms like Apple and Microsoft ballooning in valuations in the past few years, they have also become more susceptible to investor whiplash, often resulting in losses worth tens of billions of dollars in a single day of trade. Apple shed nearly \$180bn on 3 September 2020, while Microsoft lost \$177bn on 16 March in the same year.</p> <p>The disappointment over Meta’s earnings and the subsequent stock fall invoked memories of the bursting tech bubble in 2000.</p> <p>Big technology and communications companies played a big role in driving gains for the broader market throughout the pandemic and much of the recovery in 2021, but the market seems to have shifted, said Brad McMillan, chief investment officer for Commonwealth Financial Network.</p> <p>“There’s a general sense that what’s been moving the market higher is not going to take us to the next level,” McMillan said. “The question is where is the next growth engine coming from.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Less public transit use, more car crashes
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/04/public-transit-car-crash-deaths-us
GIST	<p>The Covid-19 pandemic has seen two pernicious trends emerge as to how Americans are getting around their country: public transit is struggling with a reduced number of paying customers, while there has been a sharp increase in car crash deaths.</p> <p>The shuttering of businesses, the rise of working from home and a fear of contracting the coronavirus saw public transport use plummet across the US – commuter rail alone reported a 79% decline in ridership in the year to September 2020. Despite a slight resurgence in 2021, trips taken on all modes of public transit are still around half of what they were before the pandemic, federal government figures show.</p> <p>Meanwhile, transport officials have also been alarmed by a surging number of car-related deaths.</p> <p>The first half of 2021 saw more than 20,000 people die in car crashes, according to federal government data, up 18% on the previous year and the highest since 2006. Pete Buttigieg, the US transportation secretary, called the death toll, which is claiming the lives of about 3,000 people a month, “a national crisis” as he unveiled a new road safety strategy last week.</p> <p>Transport experts say that these trends, while complex and not necessarily linked, are slowing progress on road safety while also hampering efforts to improve the livability of cities and to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions from the US transportation system, which is the country’s largest contributor to dangerous climate change.</p> <p>“I think, long-term, if we don’t see major changes in transit ridership and road and land uses, we will have huge problems,” said Tara Goddard, an expert in transportation safety at Texas A&M University. “We will see emissions as horrible as they are now, road safety numbers as bad as now, inequities and social problems as bad as they are now. If we aren’t committed to serious change, we will have a lot of problems.”</p> <p>The reasons behind the increase in traffic fatalities aren’t fully understood but a prevailing theory is that people have been speeding more, and therefore involved in worse crashes, due to roads that were cleared of the congestion when the pandemic hit and people stayed at home more.</p>

“The roadway system in the US is built for speed, so when the traffic disappeared when Covid hit, traffic fatalities went off the chart,” said Benito Perez, policy director at Transportation for America. “People are also spreading out their trips during the day and more people are walking and biking on roads designed for cars. So you’re getting this constant conflict. It’s a recipe for fatal crashes.”

There has also been an “alarming” increase in people dying after being ejected from their cars during crashes because they weren’t wearing seatbelts, Goddard said, along with a rise in crashes because of drug and alcohol use by drivers. This is building upon trends seen since before the pandemic, such as the soaring popularity of hulking SUVs that are far more likely to kill pedestrians when they hit them.

“We have big, wide roads, very poor pedestrian crossings, a lack of lighting and we are buying bigger cars,” said Goddard. “It also seems there is more aggressive, distracted driving now. There is a lot going on in society that Covid has brought to a head.”

The increasing death toll on the roads has played out while public transit, long underfunded and politically overlooked in the US, has suffered from a steep drop in users that only partially rebounded as pandemic restrictions eased last year.

Many bus and train routes across the US have been curtailed, with the recent surge in infections from the Omicron variant stripping the system of a large number of sick drivers and other transit staff. Six subway lines in New York City were suspended during December and January due to a lack of available staff.

The slump in fare revenue has imperiled some public transit lines. “Unfortunately public transit has to justify its existence by showing a profit margin, whereas no such questions are asked of highway funding,” said Perez.

Although low-paid yet essential workers continued to use public transit during the pandemic through necessity, many people who could afford to work from home or take other modes of transport have stayed away from trains and subways. “Transit is so poorly resourced in the US that it makes it very fragile to disruption,” said Goddard. “If it already doesn’t work well for people, it doesn’t take much to push them off it.”

Goddard said there was a “glimmer of hope” in the Biden administration allocating \$109bn in grant funds for public transit projects from the bipartisan infrastructure bill – which is the largest single investment in public transport in US history – but that the administration’s greater focus on electric vehicles won’t solve the deep-rooted problems in how America’s towns and cities are structured.

“We need to focus on land use solutions so people don’t have to travel as much because things are closer to them, where driving isn’t the only option,” she said. “EVs certainly have a role to play but if you get hit at 45mph it doesn’t matter if it’s an EV or gas-powered car. We shouldn’t just replicate our existing problems but with new technology.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 World faces ‘bumpy, difficult’ transition
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/03/world-faces-bumpy-difficult-covid-transition-says-senior-scientist
GIST	<p>Tensions in societies around the world over the current Covid situation are going to be very difficult to handle, one of Britain’s most senior scientific figures has warned.</p> <p>Sir Jeremy Farrar, the director of the Wellcome Trust, who stepped down as a government scientific adviser in November last year, warned the idea of simply “exiting” a pandemic is not realistic.</p> <p>“I just don’t think you wake up on Tuesday and it’s finished. It’s not going to happen like that,” he said in an online meeting of the Royal Society of Medicine.</p>

“The transition from [the] acute phase of the pandemic to something new, not yet defined, it’s really difficult – bumpy, different around the world, different within a single country, with the degree of inequity that’s happened globally, but also nationally,” he said.

Farrar noted one problem is that while some people may argue the pandemic is now in the past, and the situation in the middle of the pandemic was exaggerated, others believe it’s far from over.

“And so the tensions, I think, within societies are going to be very difficult to handle,” he said.

Farrar added that while he has sympathy with the disruption of education and the health and economic impacts of Covid he is concerned about the speed at which some want to move on.

“My concern is that there will be too fast a shift to saying it’s all over and we will lose the humility of accepting that we’re only two years into a novel human pathogen, that is still a huge amount of uncertainty,” he said, adding it is also crucial to resolve [the problem of vaccine inequality](#).

While Farrar said the most likely scenario is that there will be a transition to Omicron becoming endemic, as the variant is less severe than others, it is not the only possibility.

“My worry in the push to try and move on from this [is that] we ignore those other scenarios, which are less rosy but we should be absolutely prepared for,” he said.

Farrar added that while he agreed it is time to begin easing Covid restrictions in the UK, he is in favour of keeping some measures.

“I would be in favour of continuing for instance, [mask wearing on public transport](#), in enclosed spaces, etc,” he said. “And I would be pushing ever harder on trying to encourage people to be vaccinated, get their boosting doses, and make sure that everybody has access to the vaccines from a UK perspective.”

Farrar also warned that he has deep concerns about the global Covid situation, warning that the pandemic has been made worse “by a catastrophic failure of global diplomacy”.

“The ongoing geopolitics of east /west but increasingly, understandably, north/south, because of vaccine inequity is going to lead to really troubling years ahead and will have ramifications beyond pandemics to our ability to come together to solve issues of inequality, of issues of climate change, of issues of drug resistance, of issues of migration and conflict,” he said.

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HEADLINE	02/03 US: Russia to fabricate pretext for invasion
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/us/politics/russia-ukraine-invasion-pretext.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The United States has acquired intelligence about a Russian plan to fabricate a pretext for an invasion of Ukraine using a faked video that would build on recent disinformation campaigns, according to senior administration officials and others briefed on the material.</p> <p>The plan — which the United States hopes to spoil by making public — involves staging and filming a fabricated attack by the Ukrainian military either on Russian territory or against Russian-speaking people in eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>Russia, the officials said, intended to use the video to accuse Ukraine of genocide against Russian-speaking people. It would then use the outrage over the video to justify an attack or have separatist leaders in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine invite a Russian intervention.</p> <p>Officials would not release any direct evidence of the Russian plan or specify how they learned of it, saying to do so would compromise their sources and methods. But a recent Russian disinformation</p>

campaign focused on false accusations of genocide and efforts in the Russian Parliament [to recognize breakaway governments](#) in Ukraine lent credence to the intelligence.

If carried out, the Russian operation would be an expansion of [a propaganda theme](#) that American intelligence officials and outside experts have said Moscow has been pushing on social media, on conspiracy sites and with state-controlled media since November.

The video was intended to be elaborate, officials said, with plans for graphic images of the staged, corpse-strewn aftermath of an explosion and footage of destroyed locations. They said the video was also set to include faked Ukrainian military equipment, Turkish-made drones and actors playing Russian-speaking mourners.

American officials would not say precisely who in Russia was planning the operation, but a senior official said the G.R.U., Russia's military intelligence arm, was deeply involved in the effort.

Ned Price, the State Department spokesman, discussed some details of the planned video at his daily news conference on Thursday, though he said evidence of the plot remained classified to protect American sources.

"The production of this propaganda video is one of a number of options that the Russian government is developing as a fake pretext to initiate and potentially justify military aggression against Ukraine," Mr. Price said.

A British official said its government had done its own analysis of the intelligence and had high confidence that Russia was planning to engineer a pretext to blame Ukraine for an attack. Another British official, Liz Truss, the foreign secretary, said the intelligence was "clear and shocking evidence of Russia's unprovoked aggression and underhand activity to destabilize Ukraine."

"The U.K. and our allies will continue to expose Russian subterfuge and propaganda and call it out for what it is," Ms. Truss said in a statement.

The Kremlin's spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, dismissed the American allegations in comments carried by Russian news agencies. "This isn't the first report of its kind," he said. "Similar things have been claimed before. But nothing ever came of them."

While it is not clear that senior Russian officials approved the operation, it was far along in the planning and the United States had high confidence that it was under serious consideration, officials said. Russian officials had found corpses to use in the video, discussed actors to play mourners and plotted how to make military equipment appear Ukrainian or NATO-supplied.

While the plan sounded far-fetched, American officials said they believed it could have worked to provide a spark for a Russian military operation — an outcome they said they hoped would be made less likely by exposing the effort publicly.

The highlights of the intelligence have been declassified, in hopes of both derailing the plot and convincing allies of the seriousness of the Russian planning. The officials interviewed for this article requested anonymity to discuss declassified but sensitive intelligence before it was released publicly.

Avril D. Haines, the director of national intelligence, and other top administration officials briefed members of Congress on the material on Thursday. Details of the information have also been shared with allies, as the United States and Britain push a kind of intelligence diplomacy.

In recent weeks, both Washington and London have outlined elements of Moscow's war planning, highlighting [planned troop buildups](#), [exposing a false-flag sabotage plot](#) and revealing Russian plans [to install a friendly government in Kyiv](#).

Senator Mark Warner, Democrat of Virginia and the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the recent work by the United States and Britain to publicize plots being considered by Russia was an important development. Making the information public, he said, provides notice to Ukrainians and will help the world make different, more accurate judgments about Russian actions.

“Too often we come in after the fact and say that was a false-flag operation,” Mr. Warner said. “By forewarning, it diminishes the Russian credibility and ability to use something like that as an excuse.”

The American and British strategy aims to persuade allies that Russia is not posturing and has real war plans that it could put into effect. The releases also aim to force Russia to drop and redraft plans, further delaying any invasion plan.

The longer the international community can delay a decision by President Vladimir V. Putin about whether to approve a military operation against Ukraine, the more of a chance there is that he will reconsider his plans, according to diplomats.

Some officials in the United States and Britain think Mr. Putin has underestimated how many casualties his military would suffer in any direct invasion of Ukraine.

The intelligence diplomacy push is modeled in part on Britain’s efforts to rally a strong response to the Russian nerve agent attack in England in 2018. The British government publicly released information on Russian involvement and [shared other intelligence privately](#) as it pushed allies to expel Russian diplomats in response.

After lawmakers were briefed on Thursday, Senator Jim Risch of Idaho, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said Russia was in the process of producing movies and other “false proof” that Ukraine was doing something to provoke Moscow. It is important, he said, “that the world understands that this is a false operation to try to justify them in an invasion.”

Such false-flag operations are “out of the Putin playbook,” said Senator Thom Tillis, Republican of North Carolina. He said that if Russia tried to “create some pretext, it will be rejected by the global community.”

The move to publicize the plan comes as the Duma, Russia’s lower house of Parliament, begins to consider legislation to recognize separatist-controlled eastern Ukraine as independent territories, much as Moscow has recognized Russian-occupied areas of Georgia.

If the Russian Parliament were to recognize the Donbas region of Ukraine as an independent state, a Moscow-appointed leader of that breakaway state could then request help from Mr. Putin. The Russian president has argued many times that in such a case, an intervention would be in keeping with international law and [precedents set by the United States](#).

American officials believe the plans for the video included Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 drones that have been used by the Ukrainian Army.

In October, after an artillery attack killed a Ukrainian soldier, the [Ukrainian Army used one of the drones](#) to launch a counterattack on a howitzer used by Russian-led separatist forces. Russia scrambled jets, and the situation escalated.

Russian disinformation in recent weeks has falsely accused NATO of planning an invasion of Ukraine or an intervention there. Highlighting the presence of weapons made by Turkey, a NATO ally, would allow the Russians to accuse the alliance of raising tensions in the conflict and being culpable in the death of Russian speakers.

The [draft law under consideration](#) in Russia would recognize what Moscow calls the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. Russia considered recognizing governments in the separatist-controlled region in 2014 but ultimately backed down.

The proposal was recently revived by members of the Communist Party, the second-largest faction in the Russian Duma. The Russian parliamentarians pushing the law have argued that Ukraine is planning an offensive to reassert control of the area. If that happens, the Russian lawmakers argue, Russian-speaking residents will be denied basic rights.

Ukrainian oppression of Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine is a common theme of Russian state media and websites controlled by Russian intelligence services. But the reality is that language is not the hard dividing line in Ukraine that Moscow suggests.

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HEADLINE	02/03 NBC opens Olympics to a mix of challenges
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/business/media/olympics-nbc.html
GIST	<p>Last year, NBC Sports executives called the Tokyo Olympics their most challenging undertaking ever.</p> <p>Now that experience is starting to look like a cakewalk.</p> <p>For this month's Winter Games in Beijing, NBC confronts an even trickier mix of challenges, threatening to diminish one of the network's signature products and one of the last major draws to broadcast television.</p> <p>The list of headaches is long: an event nearly free of spectators, draining excitement from the arena and ski slopes; the threat of star athletes testing positive for Covid, potentially dashing their Olympic dreams; and the vast majority of its announcers, including Johnny Weir and Tara Lipinski, offering color commentary from a network compound in Stamford, Conn., instead of China.</p> <p>The rising political tensions between the United States and China, including over China's human rights abuses, add a troubling cloud to a typically feel-good spectacle.</p> <p>"My friends and colleagues at NBC have been dealt the worst hand imaginable," said Bob Costas, who served as the network's Olympics prime-time host for more than two decades.</p> <p>The success of the Games is critical to NBC. Even as streaming services like Netflix and Disney+ have lured millions of people from broadcast networks, sports have remained a reliable moneymaker. The company has exclusive broadcast rights to the Olympics through 2032, at a cost of \$7.75 billion.</p> <p>Ratings for the Olympics have dipped in recent years — and fell sharply during last year's Summer Olympics. NBC has told advertisers to expect the ratings to be lower than the 2018 Winter Olympics, according to three people familiar with the network's ratings estimates.</p> <p>The Olympics, however, remain so central to the NBC brand that the five-rings logo has been affixed to the bottom-right-hand corner of its broadcasts for much of the last year.</p> <p>And NBC Sports executives said they were up to the challenge to produce a compelling event.</p> <p>"The good news, if there is good news, in dealing with live sports in a pandemic, is we have a ton of experience at this point," said Pete Bevacqua, the chairman of NBC Sports. "Think about the last two years across our portfolio. We have become skilled out of necessity. We saw that in Tokyo, where we had an unbelievably large presence in Stamford."</p> <p>Mike Tirico, an NBC Sports anchor, is in Beijing and will host the first few days of coverage from China. Craig Melvin, an NBC News anchor, will be in Beijing as well, along with 600 other staff members on the ground.</p>

But because of China's Covid-19 restrictions, most of the sports commentators will be in Stamford, part of a crew of about 1,500 people there. And NBC will not have access to many aspects of the Games that viewers are accustomed to: charming travelogue segments about a host city; live shots of an athlete's family and friends, who have traveled to a foreign country to see a loved one compete; commentators rushing up to a competitor who just scored gold.

NBC will deploy workarounds, including setting up cameras in the homes of athletes' family members to try to replicate a celebratory television moment that viewers expect to see. And in interviews, producers and executives said that NBC's wealth of Olympic production experience would only help matters.

"The replays will be there, the slow motion will be there, the graphics, all of that will be visually spectacular," said Mike Weisman, a former longtime executive producer for NBC Sports who oversaw coverage of the 1988 Summer Olympics.

Still, because of China's strict virus-testing policy, there are many promotional benefits to other parts of NBC Universal that the company will have to forgo this year. For years, the NBC morning franchise, "Today," as well as the "NBC Nightly News," moved their broadcasts to the Olympic host city, providing a ratings lift in the process.

But this year, the "Today" anchors, Savannah Guthrie and Hoda Kotb, will stay in New York, the first time in nearly two decades that the morning show has not traveled for the Olympics. Lester Holt, the "NBC Nightly News" anchor, will also remain in New York.

"Would you rather have 'Today' there? Yes," said Jim Bell, a former executive producer of "Today," as well as NBC's Olympics coverage from 2012 to 2018. "Would you rather have fans in the stands? You bet. Would you rather have Johnny and Tara and set them loose on the streets of Beijing? Of course. But if it comes down to you can't have the Olympics because of the pandemic, it's better than not having it."

Politics is adding another twist. NBC executives usually bank on the Olympics as a politics-proof treat for viewers that transcends ideological differences. But even that bubble has been pierced. Last week, House Republicans sent a letter to NBC executives asking about the "the extent of influence" that the Chinese government will have over the network's broadcast of the Games. In December, President Biden announced a diplomatic boycott of the Olympics because of China's human rights abuses.

"The circumstances put an inevitable damper on the whole thing," Mr. Costas said. "The average person now fully understands the nature of the Chinese regime. It's not something that just news nerds are aware of. This is broadly understood."

Mr. Weisman, the former NBC Sports producer, said, "Especially being in China, I think it may not have the same feel-good celebration that had made the Olympics so special in the past."

NBC said it would use Andrew Browne, an editorial director at Bloomberg and formerly the China editor at The Wall Street Journal, and Jing Tsu, a professor at Yale, to help provide analysis on China during the broadcasts.

"The world, as we all know, is a really complicated place right now," Molly Solomon, the executive producer of NBC's Olympics coverage, said in a news media briefing in January. "And we understand that there's some difficult issues regarding the host nation. So our coverage will provide perspective on China's place in the world and the geopolitical context in which these games are being held."

"But," she continued, "the athletes do remain the centerpiece of our coverage."

NBC is also hoping that the Games can provide a boost for its fledgling streaming app, Peacock. The company is encouraging people to sign up for a paid version of the app that will show all the Olympic events live.

Executives have vowed to make Peacock easier to use this year after an outcry from subscribers who complained the streamer was a baffling mess for last year's Summer Games.

There is a bright spot for NBC: The network is guaranteed to get a ratings boost in the middle of the Olympics. On Feb. 13, NBC will broadcast the Super Bowl, and immediately after the presentation of the Vince Lombardi trophy, the network will go straight to Olympic coverage. In recent years, programs that followed the Super Bowl generally have drawn more than 20 million viewers.

With the Super Bowl gradually drifting later into February, this will be the first time that the two signature sporting events will overlap. NBC switched its spot with CBS in the Super Bowl broadcast rotation to ensure it could broadcast both events on the same day. NBC executives are calling it Super Gold Sunday.

"A once-in-a-lifetime moment," Jenny Storms, NBCUniversal's chief marketing officer for entertainment and sports, said last month.

Mr. Bevacqua, the NBC Sports chairman, said he was hopeful that the Olympics, instead of being a downer, would be a tonic to viewers exhausted by the pandemic.

"Certainly there are challenges, and certainly there are harsh realities," he said. "But I think the beauty of sports and the beauty of Olympic sports is really needed right now more than ever, and that's the story we want to tell."

Mr. Costas said he expected NBC to be smart and resourceful. "But inevitably, no matter how good a job they do, those circumstances are going to have an impact," he said.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Austria vaccine mandate becoming law
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases#austria-covid-vaccine-mandate
GIST	<p>Austria is the first Western democracy to mandate Covid vaccinations for nearly its entire adult population, a once-unthinkable move that is being seen as a test case for other countries grappling with pockets of vaccine resistance.</p> <p>The sweeping measure, which easily cleared its final parliamentary hurdle on Thursday when it was approved by lawmakers in Austria's upper house, will be signed into law as soon as Friday by President Alexander Van der Bellen of Austria.</p> <p>The requirement will be introduced in phases.</p> <p>First, the government plans to send a letter to all Austrians in the next few weeks, notifying them of the new rules and giving them a month to comply. Exemptions will be available only to pregnant women, people who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons and people who have recently recovered from Covid-19. In this first phase, no fines will be imposed for failure to comply.</p> <p>That changes in mid-March, when the police are to start conducting random checks of vaccination status — including during traffic stops. People who cannot produce proof of vaccination can be fined up to 600 euros (about \$675). Those who contest their fines could eventually see them increased to €3,600 (about \$4,100).</p> <p>In a third phase, for which no starting date has yet been set, the government would create a formal vaccination registry of all residents, and automatically assess fines for noncompliance. If the pandemic recedes enough, though, this phase might never be put into effect, officials say.</p> <p>Polls suggest that many Austrians support the mandate, but the issue has also galvanized a noisy protest movement in the country. Tens of thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets across the country in recent months to oppose pandemic restrictions, chief among them the vaccine mandate,</p>

which was first proposed in November. At the time, cases were surging in the country, driven mostly by unvaccinated people, and Austria introduced a lockdown that applied only to the unvaccinated.

About 76 percent of people in Austria are now fully vaccinated. Even so, a new surge that began in late December has sent new cases soaring to record levels; the daily average has nearly doubled in the last two weeks.

Making vaccines mandatory rather than voluntary has been a threshold that European democracies have long seemed unwilling to cross. Leaders have stressed respect for civil liberties and drawn contrasts with the policies of more authoritarian governments.

But as the pandemic stretches into a third year with vaccination rates plateauing in a number of countries, some leaders have changed their minds.

“The path to freedom is the vaccine mandate,” Chancellor Karl Nehammer of Austria said when the law was debated in Parliament last month.

Last year, when he was interior minister, Mr. Nehammer noted the difficulty governments faced in persuading skeptical people to get inoculated voluntarily.

“It is not a question of ideology, it is a question of convincing,” he said. “We can’t do and try enough to convince so that the unvaccinated get vaccinated.”

Other countries are watching Austria’s move to a near-universal mandate closely.

In neighboring Germany, where about one in three people are not considered to be fully vaccinated, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has announced plans for a general vaccine mandate, and the country is slated to introduce one next month for health care workers and residents of nursing homes and care facilities. Italy now requires nearly everyone over 50 to be vaccinated; Greece has a similar rule for residents over 60.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Medicare to provide free at-home tests
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases#medicare-will-provide-free-at-home-virus-tests-for-pickup-the-biden-administration-says
GIST	<p>Medicare, which covers roughly 60 million Americans, will provide free over-the-counter rapid coronavirus tests beginning in the spring, according to the federal government’s Medicare and Medicaid agency.</p> <p>The policy would “allow Medicare beneficiaries to pick up tests at no cost at the point of sale and without needing to be reimbursed,” the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services said Thursday, adding that it would be the first time Medicare covered the whole cost of an over-the-counter test.</p> <p>The announcement followed weeks of clamor from lawmakers and health care advocates, who argued that Medicare recipients had been passed over in the administration’s push to require private insurers to cover the tests.</p> <p>Under the plan, which will also apply to Medicare Advantage beneficiaries, Medicare will pay eligible pharmacies and health providers to offer the tests. The administration did not say how many pharmacies would participate.</p> <p>Enrollees will be able to get up to eight tests each month, the same number covered for privately insured Americans as part of a set of new requirements the Biden administration announced last month.</p>

	<p>The free tests covered by Medicare would go to some of the most vulnerable parts of the U.S. population. The vast majority of Medicare enrollees are 65 or older; others are younger people with disabilities.</p> <p>The plan is the latest move in a patchwork of federal efforts to deliver more rapid tests, after President Biden received sharp public blowback over a limited supply of the tests around the holidays, when cases of the Omicron variant skyrocketed and demand for the tests soared. As the Biden administration hunted for tests to purchase, manufacturers scrambled to meet the demand from public and commercial buyers across the world.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 UN report: deluge pandemic medical waste
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases#medical-waste-environment-covid
GIST	<p>A new report from the World Health Organization has highlighted the overabundance of medical waste around the world caused by the coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>The thousands of tons of extra garbage — discarded syringes, old test kits and used vaccine vials — has strained waste management systems and is threatening both human health and the environment, the World Health Organization said this week.</p> <p>The agency, which is part of the United Nations, said that most of the estimated 87,000 tons of personal protective equipment and supplies for coronavirus testing and vaccinations — distributed to countries from March 2020 to November 2021 through a U.N. emergency initiative — has ended up as waste.</p> <p>In addition, more than 8 billion coronavirus vaccine doses given globally have produced 143 tons of trash in the form of syringes, needles and safety boxes. Some of the waste could expose other people to needle punctures and disease-causing germs, the report said.</p> <p>“It is absolutely vital to provide health workers with the right P.P.E.,” said Dr. Michael Ryan, the executive director of the World Health Organization’s health emergencies program, in a statement. “But it is also vital to ensure that it can be used safely without impacting on the surrounding environment.”</p> <p>To combat these problems, the report recommends the use of “eco-friendly” packaging and shipping, along with reusable equipment and products made from recyclable or biodegradable materials.</p> <p>The report also noted that 30 percent of health care facilities worldwide could not handle the amount of garbage they were creating even before the pandemic. And that number grows to as much as 60 percent in the least developed countries. The trash can contaminate the air in nearby communities when it is burned, pollute water and attract disease-carrying pests, the report’s authors wrote. They called for increased investment in cleaner waste-treatment technologies and recycling.</p> <p>Solid waste experts have said that high volumes of personal protective equipment have been misclassified as hazardous. Much of that material is dumped in burn pits because it is excluded from normal trash.</p> <p>“The report is a reminder that although the pandemic is the most severe health crisis in a century, it is connected with many other challenges that countries face,” said Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the W.H.O. director general.</p> <p>The estimate does not include the trash from hundreds of tons of supplies that were not distributed through the U.N., or face coverings and at-home testing kits used by the general public.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Sweden will lift most Covid restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/world/covid-test-vaccine-cases#sweden-announces-end-covid-restrictions

STOCKHOLM — The Swedish government will lift most Covid restrictions next week, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson of Sweden announced on Thursday. The move adds Sweden to the growing list of European nations, including Denmark and Norway, that are scrapping pandemic protocols even though new cases continue to soar in Europe.

Starting on Feb. 9, there will be no limit on how many people can gather at restaurants, sports stadiums, and other events, according to Lena Hallengren, the minister of health and social affairs. People will no longer be required to work from home. And travel restrictions on visitors from other Nordic countries will be relaxed.

“The pandemic is not over, but we are headed into a new phase,” Ms. Andersson said at a news conference on Thursday.

She pointed to research suggesting that while record numbers of people in Sweden are testing positive for the Omicron variant, they are straining hospitals less than earlier coronavirus surges did.

The Swedish Public Health Authority reported that the average number of new coronavirus cases reported daily in Sweden peaked in late January and, while still high, is now declining. As of Thursday, Sweden, a country of about 10.3 million people, has reported a total of more than 2.2 million confirmed cases, [according to the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University](#), and more than 16,000 coronavirus-related deaths. More than 73 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated so far.

Ms. Anderson said that the country will continue to recommend that people take special precautions in certain situations — for example, that unvaccinated people avoid indoor events.

A number of Sweden’s neighbors and fellow European Union members have announced easing of their pandemic rules in the last week. Nightclubs in Denmark are reopening, and the government said it no longer considered Covid a “[socially critical disease](#).” Norway is dropping its testing requirements for arriving travelers who are fully vaccinated. And Finland has said it would end all of its remaining restrictions this month.

Though Europe is still reporting large numbers of new cases, a top World Health Organization official in the region said on Thursday that the Omicron surge was giving the region an opportunity to bring virus transmission under control and reach an “enduring peace” with the coronavirus.

So many people will now have some level of immunity, either from vaccination or from surviving an infection, that the region may be moving into a “period of higher protection,” which should be seen as a “cease-fire” and “a plausible endgame” in the pandemic, the official, Dr. Hans Kluge, told reporters at a virtual news conference. [Scientists have cautioned that the protection](#) from a previous infection [may wane over time](#), and [may not apply as well to future versions of the virus](#).

Dr. Kluge is the regional director for the W.H.O.’s Europe region, which takes in all of Europe, plus Israel and all of the former Soviet Union, including the Central Asian republics — more than 50 countries in all. Hospitalizations are still rising in the region, mainly in countries where vaccination rates among the more vulnerable parts of the population are relatively low, he said, while the number of Covid-related intensive care hospitalizations and deaths in the region has started to plateau.

Dr. Kluge’s comments were more upbeat [than recent remarks by other W.H.O. officials](#), who have voiced alarm at the prospect of countries using Omicron’s relatively lower severity as a reason to scrap pandemic protocols.

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the organization’s director general, said this week that it was “premature” for any country to declare victory over a virus that “continues to evolve before our very eyes.”

	Dr. Kluge cautioned against thinking the pandemic was finished, saying that achieving sustained relief from the coronavirus would depend heavily on countries vaccinating and boosting their populations, promoting responsible behavior and protecting the most vulnerable.
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HEADLINE	02/03 Storm disrupts travel, power across country
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/us/winter-storm-snow-ice#a-widespread-winter-storm-is-set-to-cause-a-second-day-of-disruptions
GIST	<p>SAN ANTONIO — A sprawling winter storm reaching from North Texas to upstate New York continued its relentless trek across the country on Thursday, leaving thousands stranded at airports, shivering in their homes and facing freezing rain on icy roads.</p> <p>Heavy snow and freezing rain were forecast to continue into Friday from the southwestern United States to New England, according to the National Weather Service, while portions of the South could see flash flooding and tornadoes. Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas called it “one of the most significant icing events that we’ve had in the state of Texas in at least several decades.”</p> <p>More than 5,000 flights across the country were canceled by Thursday afternoon — the worst day for cancellations since April 2020, at the outset of the coronavirus pandemic — and more than 2,300 were delayed, according to FlightAware, a tracking website. Dallas was hit particularly hard, with at least 65 percent of outgoing flights temporarily grounded at its largest airport until a runway could be reopened around lunchtime.</p> <p>Power outages were a problem, too, with at least 300,000 homes and businesses losing electricity along the storm’s path, primarily in Ohio and Tennessee.</p> <p>The arrival of single-digit temperatures, snow and sleet in North Texas came nearly a year after an eight-day freeze caused widespread power outages, plunging the state into darkness and claiming the lives of more than 240 people.</p> <p>Mr. Abbott on Texas sought to reassure the state’s 29 million residents that this time, the power grid would hold.</p> <p>“The power grid is performing very well,” he said during a news conference in Austin, adding that the state had enough power available to ride out the freezing temperatures.</p> <p>Local officials urged motorists to stay off the roads in Dallas, and the Dallas and Fort Worth school districts, among the largest in the state, were closed for the rest of the week. Outside of Texas, black ice and highways slicked with snow led to several crashes in southeastern Kansas. In Arkansas, the Weather Service said conditions could cause continued power outages and make travel “very hazardous or impossible.”</p> <p>In Memphis, ice began accumulating from a continuous freezing rain on Thursday, leading to traffic crashes, downed trees and power outages. Ice storm warnings were issued farther east, including parts of western Tennessee and Kentucky.</p> <p>The situation at the highways was more dire in Illinois, where a portion of Interstate 57 was blocked for several hours on Thursday after several tractor-trailers jackknifed.</p> <p>The conditions also threatened to delay deliveries as truck drivers encountered harsh conditions along their routes. At a snowy Ohio truck stop off Interstate 75 between Dayton and Cincinnati on Thursday, dozens of rigs sat idle.</p>

“They said to try back tomorrow, so I’m stuck here at least until then,” said Barry Nelson, 50, who had driven an oil shipment from Houston to deliver to Monroe, Ohio, only to find the terminal closed because of the weather.

Some of the storm effects were still yet to be known. The widespread winter storm was expected to continue its destructive path east on Thursday night into Friday. One forecast predicted that Maine and upstate New York could see up to 18 inches of snow.

“This newest storm is poised to hit us with everything in the weather arsenal — heavy snow, sleet and freezing rain,” Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York said on Wednesday.

Even tornadoes, which tend to be common during warmer months, were reported by the unusually busy National Weather Service. In Sawyerville, Ala., south of Tuscaloosa, forecasters urged residents to take shelter as a “large and extremely dangerous” tornado formed. The Weather Service received reports of damaged homes, snapped and uprooted trees, and two pickup trucks that had flipped into a pond.

A tornado watch was extended to cover the entire central band of the state.

“Conditions are definitely supportive for any one of these organized storms to form into a tornado,” said Gerald Satterwhite, a National Weather Service meteorologist in Birmingham, Ala.

“Flying debris will be dangerous to those caught without shelter,” warned the Weather Service, which said the tornado was moving east. “Mobile homes will be damaged or destroyed. Damage to roofs, windows, and vehicles will occur. Tree damage is likely.”

Frustrated travelers endured a slew of cancellations at each of the three largest airports serving Ohio — Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, John Glenn Columbus International Airport and Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport — as well as at airports in St. Louis and in Austin, Texas.

On an average day, the Federal Aviation Administration handles 45,000 flights, meaning the cancellations and delays on Thursday affected more than 10 percent of air traffic in the United States. While there is much seasonal variation, daily cancellation totals tend to be fewer than 2 percent on average.

Despite the haphazard conditions, people across the country tried to make the best of it. In East Dallas, nine freezing friends met at Lakeland Hills Park, where they drank beer and rode Boogie Boards in the snow.

Others followed suit in Indianapolis, where some residents were excited about the snow. James Schubert said he wanted his 6-month-old daughter to experience snow for the first time.

“She likes watching the snow fall and blow around, so hopefully that translates into snow sports someday,” Mr. Schubert said.

Many residents heeded the warnings, though, and waited for the storm to pass. In southwestern Ohio, roads were quieter than usual and most schools and many factories closed their doors. Only a handful of customers braved the cold to get a bite at Angie’s Diner in Carlisle, a small city next to Interstate 75. John Delcamp, 59, an industrial worker, ordered a cheeseburger.

“The roads were fine,” Mr. Delcamp said, shaking his head at the closures.

Jay Slusser, who runs the cafe with his wife Angie, said, “If you watch the news, they are telling you to stay home, and it seems like people are.” Still, he said, even if the weather worsened, the diner would remain open.

HEADLINE	02/03 Icy conditions threatens travel in Northeast
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/us/winter-storm-snow-ice#icy-conditions-will-make-travel-dangerous-across-the-northeast-on-friday
GIST	<p>Icy conditions could make roads hazardous across the Northeast on Friday, as rain in the region turns to a mix of snow, sleet and freezing rain beginning Thursday night.</p> <p>Winter weather advisories are in effect across parts of the region for Friday, with up to an inch of sleet expected to accumulate in parts of northern Connecticut, southeastern Massachusetts and northern Rhode Island. About one-fifth of an inch of ice accumulation is expected in some parts of the lower Hudson Valley, northeast New Jersey and southern Connecticut.</p> <p>Up and down the Northeast, icy conditions threaten to make morning commutes treacherous.</p> <p>In the New York City area, rain will change to a mix of snow, sleet and freezing rain late Thursday night before tapering off Friday evening, creating dangerously slick roads throughout the day.</p> <p>In the Boston area, sleet in the morning followed by a “flash freeze” that will coat road surfaces in ice will pose a challenge to evening commuters as well.</p> <p>“Driving for the afternoon commute could be just as dangerous as the morning commute, if not more so,” said Bill Simpson, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Boston.</p> <p>Farther north, in Portland, Maine, up to two inches of sleet accumulation is expected in time for the Friday morning commute.</p> <p>“It’s going to be a pretty dangerous commute in the morning if the roads haven’t been treated or cleared yet,” said Sarah Thunberg, a meteorologist with the Weather Service in Portland.</p> <p>Continuing cold temperatures over the coming days will keep the roads icy. “That sleet is going to be a bit more difficult to clean up because we’re not going to get much help from warm temperatures,” Ms. Thunberg said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Ice storm threatens Arkansas to Kentucky
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/us/winter-storm-snow-ice#ice-roads-power-outages
GIST	<p>A “damaging ice storm” is likely to affect a region from eastern Arkansas to western Kentucky on Thursday, the National Weather Service said, with parts of Texas and Ohio also expected to see heavy ice accumulation.</p> <p>Although snow can be disruptive, especially for places that do not normally contend with it, ice is considered a more serious threat. As roads become slick, crashes can injure or kill people while snarling important traffic routes. Outages often occur when trees and power lines snap under the weight of accumulating ice.</p> <p>The Weather Service in Louisville, Ky., warned of “treacherous driving conditions” and said that travel would be “difficult to impossible” by late Thursday. Louisville and Frankfort could see between a quarter-inch and half-inch of ice, with even more possible in Lexington, it said.</p> <p>Gov. Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas positioned eight National Guard units across the state in advance of the storm, which is coming days after residents in shorts and T-shirts filled grocery stores in search of winter supplies.</p> <p>Image</p>

	<p>The Weather Service in Little Rock expects the state’s northwest, which includes Fayetteville, to receive the most snow — about six inches — but says the problematic ice buildup is projected for the central I-40 corridor.</p> <p>“When it comes to ice, it’s just a completely different animal,” Dave Parker, a spokesman for the Arkansas Department of Transportation, told reporters.</p> <p>In Middletown, Ohio, an industrial steel city between Dayton and Cincinnati, residents were warily eyeing a forecast on Wednesday that called for cold rain to change to ice and snow after dark.</p> <p>Diver’s Garden and Pet Supplies, a mainstay for 130 years, has closed because of snow only twice — during the Great Blizzard of 1978 and another storm in 2008. Its customers, however, seemed to be preparing for the worst.</p> <p>Aaron Diver said the business had gone through three semi-truck loads of salt and lots of bird food, a popular alternative. The ice melt and firewood were sold out.</p> <p>Tom Huiet was one of the last-minute shoppers who came into Diver’s seeking salt to put on his driveway and sidewalks. He works for the city’s building inspection division but will be called on to plow roads when the storm hits.</p> <p>“I am going to go home and get a nap now,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Europe to enter ‘long period of tranquility’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/03/europe-set-for-long-period-of-tranquillity-in-pandemic-says-who
GIST	<p>Europe could soon enter a “long period of tranquility” that amounts to a “ceasefire” in the pandemic thanks to the less severe Omicron variant, high levels of immunity and the arrival of warmer spring weather, the World Health Organization has said.</p> <p>In an upbeat assessment, Hans Kluge, the WHO’s Europe director, said the region was in a position of “higher protection” that could “bring us enduring peace”, even if a new, more virulent variant than Omicron should emerge.</p> <p>Kluge said the 53-country region – which includes the UK – had recorded 12 million new coronavirus cases last week, the highest single weekly total of the pandemic, with about 22% of all tests returning a positive result.</p> <p>However, hospital admissions, although growing, were not rising at the same rate and the number of patients in intensive care was not increasing significantly, he said. The number of deaths across the region was also starting to plateau.</p> <p>Kluge said “a large capital of vaccine-derived and natural immunity, a favourable seasonality pause and a lower severity of the Omicron variant” meant governments now had “a singular opportunity to take control of transmission”.</p> <p>This opened up the prospect of “a long period of tranquility and a much higher level of population defence” against any fresh resurgence in infection rates, he said.</p> <p>The optimistic forecast comes days after Kluge said it was “plausible” the region was “moving towards a kind of pandemic endgame”.</p>

	<p>But Kluge stressed on Thursday that authorities must use the respite constructively, by continuing vaccine and booster campaigns, protecting the most vulnerable, promoting individual responsibility and intensifying surveillance to detect new variants.</p> <p>“I believe it is possible to respond to new variants that will inevitably emerge without reinstalling the kind of disruptive measures we needed before,” he said. But he added it must now be a top priority to ensure all countries are equally well protected.</p> <p>“This demands a drastic and uncompromising increase in vaccine-sharing across borders,” Kluge said. “We cannot accept vaccine inequity for one more day – vaccines must be for everyone, in the remotest corner of our vast region and beyond.”</p> <p>On the eve of World Cancer Day, the WHO regional director also noted the “catastrophic impact” the pandemic had had on people with cancer as health systems struggled with screening, diagnosis and treatment during the past two years.</p> <p>During the early stages of the pandemic, he said, diagnosis of invasive tumours fell by 44% in Belgium, colorectal screenings decreased by 46% in Italy, and in Spain the number of cancers diagnosed in 2020 was 34% lower than expected.</p> <p>The situation in many countries had improved since then, he said, but “the knock-on effect of this disruption will be felt for years” and any respite from the pandemic must be used immediately to reduce backlogs for chronic care services.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Ukraine missile development programs
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-missile-development-programs-are-challenge-for-moscow-11643887678?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine—Ukraine is developing indigenous missile capabilities aimed at detering Russian military action in the future—and that increasingly worry Moscow.</p> <p>Kyiv has revived a defense industry that once churned out advanced weapons for the Soviet Union and is now working on a series of missiles, including one that can travel up to 600 miles to hit its target—potentially putting Moscow within range of a Ukrainian strike.</p> <p>Ukraine’s national security authorities say they intend to invest billions of dollars in the projects over the coming decade, and they are triggering alarm bells in Russia.</p> <p>“In the future, a Ukrainian missile attack on Moscow is quite real,” Russian Lt. Gen. Valery Zaparenko, a former senior member of Russia’s General Staff, told Gazeta.ru, a Russian media outlet. “Ukraine has the scientific, technical and production potential.”</p> <p>Kyiv is now carrying out final tests of its first domestically produced medium-range cruise missile, dubbed the Neptune, which is designed for use primarily against warships. Ukrainian defense officials expect the first Neptunes to be deployed to vulnerable coastal areas by April.</p> <p>An extension of a Soviet-era missile, the KH-35, which was fired from ships and planes, the Neptune is modified to strike from truck-mounted launchers at targets on both land and water. Its range is estimated to be 200 miles and its main quarry would be cruisers, destroyers and other warships.</p> <p>“Ukraine having its own armament is important,” said an official from Ukroboronprom, Ukraine’s state-owned defense conglomerate, which controls the companies that designed and manufacture the Neptune.</p> <p>“The country is doing everything possible to ensure that its own weapons are produced in a closed cycle on the territory of Ukraine, which poses a threat to its opponents,” the official said.</p>

Russia has overwhelming naval superiority in the Black Sea, giving it the ability to fire at targets onshore in Ukraine from coastal waters and to conduct amphibious landings. The Neptune is aimed at raising the costs of any Russian effort to do that.

“The difference in capabilities is substantial,” said Andriy Zagorodnyuk, a former Ukrainian defense minister now with the Centre for Defence Strategies, a Kyiv think tank.

With Neptune squadrons settled around the coastline, “we can pretty much hit any target within our territorial waters,” he said. “Essentially, this is about being able to block the capabilities of the Russians if they try to attack.”

Western officials say an amphibious landing near Odesa and Kherson in southern Ukraine would be one option for Russian President Vladimir Putin if he [widens his military campaign against Ukraine](#).

While Washington warns that a Russian invasion may be imminent, Moscow—which amassed more than 100,000 troops around Ukraine—denies that it plans a war. Several Russian military vessels capable of amphibious landings are currently sailing into the Black Sea from bases in the Baltic.

Ukraine used to house a significant part of the Soviet Union’s defense industries, including its ballistic missile manufacturers. During the first two decades of its independence, however, Kyiv neglected domestic defense research and development, relying on security assurances and longstanding relationships with Russian arms manufacturers.

When war broke out between [Ukraine and Russian proxies in 2014](#), Kyiv found itself fighting with outdated technologies. Ukraine lost much of its navy after Russia seized the Crimean peninsula that year.

Illustrating Ukraine’s inability to defend its maritime borders, Russia seized Ukrainian ships and sailors in the [Kerch Strait](#) between the Azov and Black Seas in 2018 and continues to charge merchant ships to navigate the strait.

By 2018, Ukraine had redoubled efforts to revitalize its Soviet-legacy arms industry, focusing on missiles and drones that could help offset Russia’s massive advantage in aircraft and ships.

Some defense analysts have called the Neptune a next-generation missile, saying that its technological characteristics create issues that Russia will have to take seriously.

Neptune’s navigation and target-acquiring signals distribute across a broad frequency band, making them difficult for ships to recognize, and the missile’s low flight profile frustrates conventional air-defense systems, said Reuben F. Johnson, an aerospace and defense technology analyst in Kyiv.

“If you’re 100 kilometers-plus, you’re going to have to start to think about how you deal with these batteries,” said Douglas Barrie, a defense fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London think tank. “They become a priority if you’re going to try and mount any kind of maritime operation in the littoral region around Ukraine’s coast.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 Covid hospitalizations tracking downward
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-covid-hospitalizations-continue-tracking-downward-11643891898?mod=hp_listb_pos1
GIST	Hospitalizations for Covid-19 in the U.S. continued to fall, with the seven-day average of patients with confirmed or suspected cases easing to 134,000 on Wednesday, down 16% from a Jan. 20 high, according to data from the Department of Health and Human Services.

Deaths, a lagging indicator, are still ticking upward, reaching a seven-day average of 2,530, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, though they are still off the highs recorded in January last year. Public health experts say that while [the more contagious Omicron variant](#) of the virus is less likely to cause severe illness than previous variants, the large number of infections this winter means it is continuing to cause a large and growing number of fatalities.

Still, the drop-off in hospitalizations combined with [the effect of vaccinations](#) is giving health experts reason to be optimistic that the current wave of infections might have crested, especially in densely-populated coastal states that were first hit, and that deaths will also decline in the coming weeks.

The Biden administration on Thursday broadened its efforts to distribute Covid-19 tests. People enrolled in either original Medicare or Medicare Advantage will be able to get eight over-the-counter rapid tests for free a month starting in the early spring, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services said. The Biden administration's requirement that insurers cover the cost of at-home tests [didn't originally apply to Medicare](#) because the program typically doesn't cover self-administered diagnostic tests under federal law.

The new initiative enables Medicare to pay certain pharmacies and other entities directly so that beneficiaries can pick up the tests at no cost at those select locations. Consumer advocacy groups and some Democratic lawmakers had pressed the Biden administration to find a pathway to enable coverage for Medicare beneficiaries, saying that seniors in the program should get free tests because they are most vulnerable to severe infection.

Optimism that the worst of the Omicron wave may be over is also gaining a foothold in Europe.

French Health Minister Olivier Véran told French TV station BFM TV on Wednesday that "the worst is behind us," amid signs the Omicron wave of Covid-19 has passed its peak in the country.

The number of new daily hospital deaths in France—277 on Wednesday—fell from the previous day. The number of new admissions to intensive-care units for Covid-19 fell slightly from a week earlier, while the average number of new infections in the country has also been falling, according to government figures.

Mr. Véran said he hoped that the requirement for people 18 and older in France to show proof of vaccination for entry into venues like museums and restaurants could be relaxed in the coming months. "The vaccine pass will have an end, and given the current dynamics of the epidemic, it is likely that this end will be well before the month of July, unless there is bad news," Mr. Véran said.

Germany's STIKO vaccination commission, which issues recommendations for vaccine use, said Thursday that it was recommending the recently approved Novovax vaccine for use in people 18 years old and older. The commission also said it was recommending a fourth mRNA vaccine for high-risk individuals or those who had frequent contacts with them.

Those 70 and older, nursing homes residents, immune-depressed patients five and older, should get a second booster shot at the earliest three months and healthcare personnel at least six months after their third shot, the commission said. It said the recommendation was based on recent studies showing that immunity against the Omicron conferred by mRNA booster shots waned after a few months, especially in older recipients and those with compromised immune systems.

Swiss healthcare giant [Roche Holding](#) AG predicts that the pandemic will come to an end this year, telling investors that it expects revenue from its Covid-19 treatments and diagnostic tests to decline by 2 billion Swiss francs, equivalent to \$2.2 billion, to 5 billion Swiss francs this year. Chief Executive Severin Schwan told reporters that although he expected strong Covid-19 sales in the first quarter, he predicted a slowdown in the second quarter and for the pandemic to shift to an endemic state—meaning that the virus no longer surges in large waves around the world—around the middle of the year. He

	<p>added though that he'd been wrong before: in the middle of last year he told investors to expect a slowdown in pandemic-related sales, before the Delta and Omicron variants took hold.</p> <p>China has pushing ahead with construction of a series of fences and other barriers along its southern borders, ostensibly to prevent small traders and smugglers bringing Covid-19 into the country. Beijing has been trying to maintain a strict zero-Covid policy through stringent lockdowns and mass testing, stepping up its efforts ahead of the start of the Winter Olympics this week.</p> <p>Some analysts suggest it could disrupt trade flows and the real purpose of the fortifications might be to deter migrants.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Medicare surcharges can shock retirees
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/medicare-shock-retirees-tax-season-11643848093?mod=hp_listc_pos3
GIST	<p><i>I would like to see you write, and warn your readers, about Medicare surcharges. I was insufficiently aware of the impacts. Perhaps you can cushion the shock for others.</i></p> <p>“Shock,” often, is the right word. And tax season is a good time to address this.</p> <p>The topic here is the “Income Related Monthly Adjustment Amount,” or IRMAA. That’s the formal name for the additional premium that some individuals and couples who are enrolled in Medicare pay for their coverage.</p> <p>To be specific: Most beneficiaries in 2022 will pay \$170.10 a month for Medicare Part B, which covers doctors’ fees and other expenses. But...if your income on your federal tax return for 2020 (more in a moment) exceeded \$91,000 as an individual, or \$182,000 as a couple filing jointly, your monthly premium this year likely will be larger than \$170.10.</p> <p>If, for instance, your income in 2020 exceeded the amounts noted above by so much as a penny, your monthly Part B premium jumps almost \$70. From that point, the premium continues to climb in line with your income, eventually topping off at almost \$580 a month. What’s more, a similar math applies to high-income beneficiaries enrolled in Medicare Part D, which covers prescription drugs; here, too, monthly premiums escalate along with income.</p> <p>Yes, all this is painful. But what’s <i>more</i> painful, as our reader indicates, is that these surcharges often come as a complete surprise. The first time that many retirees learn about these fees is when they open a letter from the Social Security Administration (which handles Medicare billing), notifying them that their monthly premiums in the coming year will be going up.</p> <p>(Note: The federal government uses a two-year “look back” to determine whether you should pay a surcharge. That’s why premiums for 2022, for instance, are based on your 2020 tax return.)</p> <p>Why the surprise? Because many retirees aren’t aware these surcharges even exist, or don’t understand how they’re triggered. Again, your income (specifically, your “modified adjusted gross income”) is the key. As such, large—and, frequently, one-time—financial events can push you into surcharge territory.</p> <p>Examples: Did you sell your house or a rental property and end up with a sizable capital gain? Did you withdraw a large sum from your IRA? Are you still working and earning a six-figure salary? Did you convert a large chunk of your traditional IRA to a Roth? Any of these circumstances could inflate your income substantially—and leave you blindsided by IRMAA.</p> <p>The larger point: For anyone getting ready to enroll in Medicare, as well as current beneficiaries, “IRMAA planning” should be part of your tax planning—anticipating how financial transactions today can affect your taxes tomorrow. The good news: There are ways to get relief from, or lessen the impact of, Medicare surcharges; an online search—“how to avoid IRMAA”—can get people started.</p>

HEADLINE	02/03 World food prices closer to record high
SOURCE	https://finance.yahoo.com/news/world-food-prices-climbing-closer-095351142.html
GIST	<p>(Bloomberg) -- Global food prices jumped toward a record last month, further adding to the surging cost of living for consumers.</p> <p>The United Nations' index of prices rose 1.1% in January, pushed up by more expensive vegetable oils and dairy. The gauge is edging closer to 2011's all-time high, and unfavorable weather for crops and the fallout from an energy crisis threaten to keep prices high going forward.</p> <p>Inflation has been running rampant across the globe, and the latest leg higher in the UN's food index could further stretch household budgets. The commodities tracked by the gauge are used in most grocery store products or fed to animals from which those items are produced. That's particularly bad news for the poorest consumers and nations with the least disposable income.</p> <p>The poorest "segments in the population will feel the pinch the most," Josef Schmidhuber, deputy director for markets and trade at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, said by phone. "High energy costs and high food costs and high necessities -- they account for a large part of their overall expenditures."</p> <p>Sugar marked the only commodity that eased during the month, while costs for meat, grain, dairy and vegetable oils rose. Countries spanning Turkey to Paraguay are facing food inflation.</p> <p>Surging energy prices have bolstered the appeal of crop-based biofuels and raised the cost of fertilizers and fuel for farmers. That could force cutbacks on farm inputs, particularly in developing nations, which may increase reliance on crop imports if harvests falter, Schmidhuber said.</p> <p>Crop supplies also face risks from bad weather and geopolitical tensions. A dry spell has hit South American soy fields, while palm oil prices have reached a record due to labor shortages and export restrictions. The possibility of conflict at the Ukraine border also has the market watching for any impact to Black Sea grain shipments.</p> <p>For now, output is struggling to keep up with demand as economies rebound from the pandemic, farm adviser Agritel said in a note this week.</p> <p>"Galloping inflation has started on energies and raw materials and is moving now toward consumer prices," it said. "It is hurting emerging countries, which are lagging behind with deeper and lasting consequences of the crisis."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Snoqualmie Tribe acquires ancestral land
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article258031348.html
GIST	<p>The Snoqualmie Indian Tribe has acquired approximately 12,000 acres of forestlands in the Tolt River Watershed, marking the largest acquisition of ancestral lands in the Tribe's modern history.</p> <p>The lands, located in King County, are near lands originally promised, but never delivered, to the Tribe as its reservation by the federal government in the 1930s, according to the Tribe's news release. They hold significant cultural, historic, environmental and economic value to the Tribe.</p> <p>"Because of this purchase, roughly 12,000 acres of the ancestral lands of the Snoqualmie Indian Tribe are being returned to the People who have loved, cared for, cultivated, and protected them since the beginning of time, and who dearly felt their loss for over a century," said Snoqualmie Tribal Chairman Robert de los Angeles in a news release.</p>

Now named the Snoqualmie Tribe Ancestral Forest, the land previously managed for industrial timber purposes for over a century will be used for continued sustainable timber harvests as part of a larger holistic plan to manage key ecosystems and build upon the Tribe's cultural heritage and ancient connection to the site.

The acquisition was aided by nonprofit environmental group Forterra and managed by Campbell Global LLC on behalf of the undisclosed landowner.

"We have great respect for the people of the Snoqualmie Indian Tribe. They are committed to their heritage. It is an honor to be a part of the forestlands now being under their stewardship. We are looking forward to have the Snoqualmie Tribe as a neighbor and deepening our existing relationship," Campbell Global Chairman and CEO John Gilleland stated in the news release.

"I congratulate the Snoqualmie Tribe on a major land acquisition and victory for conservation in our region," said King County Executive Dow Constantine in a news release. "The Snoqualmie Tribe has provided leadership on important economic and cultural challenges, including the emergency work to restore the Lake Sammamish Kokanee. Today's bold action affirms the Tribe's strong commitment to protecting water quality and restoring habitat, contributing to the collective action we're taking throughout local watersheds."

In 2019, the Tribe acquired the Salish Lodge and Spa and the surrounding lands adjacent to Snoqualmie Falls — the Tribe's most sacred site — for \$125 million. The Tribe does not own the falls itself.

"Going forward, our Tribe will sustainably manage these lands to produce revenue for our Tribe while we steward the functioning ecosystems and thriving wildlife populations that have shared these lands with our People since time immemorial," de los Angeles said. "Caring for these lands is the sacred duty given to our Tribe by the Creator, and no one can do it better."

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HEADLINE	02/03 UN experts: halt Nooksack evictions
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article258017568.html
GIST	<p>United Nations human rights experts called on the United States to halt the eviction of 63 former citizens of the Nooksack Indian Tribe.</p> <p>The 21 families faced eviction from their homes while at various stages of acquiring ownership, with some due to take full ownership this year. The homes were constructed by the Tribe on land owned by the U.S. government with funding from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development's Native American Housing and Self-Determination Act.</p> <p>"We appeal to the U.S. Government to respect the right to adequate housing, which is enshrined under article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 21 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and to ensure that it abides by its international obligations, including with respect to the rights of indigenous peoples," the experts said.</p> <p>The team of U.N. experts includes Francisco Cali Tzay, special rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples, and Balakrishnan Rajagopal, special rapporteur on adequate housing.</p> <p>Special rapporteurs work on a voluntary basis as part of the U.N.'s Human Rights Council independent from any government or organization. They are not U.N. staff and do not receive a salary for their work.</p> <p>"We are also concerned that the forced evictions will deny them the possibility of enjoying their own culture and of using their own language in community with others," they said.</p> <p>Evictions were due to begin Dec. 28, 2021, but stalled due to severe snow and ice storms in the region. Tribal leaders had announced the evictions would resume in early February.</p>

The evictions had been prohibited by the Tribe's courts, but the ruling was ignored by the Tribal Council, according to a news release from the UN.

According to information and documents provided by Indigenous rights lawyer Gabe Galanda — who represents more than 300 people disenrolled from the Tribe in 2018 — the Department of Housing and Urban Development requested the Tribe refrain from any evictions in September.

In October, the request was reiterated by Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs Bryan Newland, who notified the Tribe that the Department of Housing and Urban Development expressed concerns the evictions denied the individuals due process and recommended halting the evictions pending an investigation.

“The Department takes HUD's concern seriously and will review the situation to ensure that the Tribe is in compliance with (the Indian Civil Rights Act) and Federal law,” Newland wrote in a letter obtained by Galanda.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of Housing and Urban Development asked for a delay again in December pending the Interior's determination on whether the Indian Civil Rights Act was violated.

Nooksack council representatives replied that they were concerned about potential BIA involvement, but the evictions were legal and they would cooperate with the investigation, according to Galanda's obtained records.

Nearly a decade ago, efforts began to remove more than 300 self-identifying Nooksack members the Tribal council said were incorrectly enrolled and could not show proper proof of lineage.

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HEADLINE	02/03 King Co., Kent pay \$260,000 for rough arrest
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/king-county-kent-pay-260000-to-settle-lawsuit-filed-by-man-roughly-arrested-in-jail-lobby/
GIST	<p>A 35-year-old Kent man who was roughly arrested by corrections officers after he was ordered out of the lobby of the Maleng Regional Justice Center while trying to use a payment kiosk has settled a federal civil rights lawsuit for \$260,000, according to attorneys.</p> <p>Jevon Pines was tackled, beaten, shocked with a Taser and handcuffed by officers from the King County Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention on June 4, 2018, after he became belligerent when he was expelled from the facility's lobby while attempting to deposit money into the account of an incarcerated relative.</p> <p>He was acquitted of fourth-degree assault by a jury the following year, however, after surveillance video obtained by his defense attorney showed Pines complied with the corrections officers' orders and was beaten and taken into custody anyway.</p> <p>According to defense attorneys in the case, the settlement involves a payment of \$250,000 by King County and \$10,000 from the city of Kent. Kent officers arrested and sought criminal charges against Pines on the representation of the Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention, or DAJD, corrections officers without reviewing the video or conducting any further investigation, according to the lawsuit and testimony at the criminal trial.</p> <p>Several emails and phone messages seeking comment from Pines' lawyers were not immediately returned Thursday.</p>

The DAJD said Thursday in a statement: “We continuously update our policies and protocols to ensure that we’re following best practices. We review all uses of force. We require equity training for employees at all levels of our organization.”

[The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in March 2021](#), alleged that officers from the county’s DAJD acted “wantonly and oppressively” when they tackled Pines, repeatedly used a stun gun on him and struck him with fists while he was walking out of the building.

Pines, who is Black, had entered the reception area of the Regional Justice Center near closing time. Security camera video shows him waving a bill while, according to reports, asking passersby and the window clerk for change.

The video shows that there were other people in the lobby that evening, but the lawsuit alleged two DAJD corrections officers keyed in on Pines at a payment kiosk and told him it was time to leave.

“He wasn’t the only person there,” said his criminal defense attorney, Matthew Zenner, at Pines’ May 2019 criminal trial. “But he’s the only Black man who was there at the time.”

When Pines protested, the lawsuit alleges that King County Corrections Officer Timothy McMurrick unplugged the kiosk. Zenner said at trial that Pines lost the money he’d put in the machine.

At that point, the officers reported that Pines became belligerent and began to call them names and taunt them, but headed for the exit with both officers following close behind.

Zenner, who reminded the jury at trial that the corrections officers are not certified police and do not have the same authority as an officer to use force and make arrests, said the video shows McMurrick and another DAJD officer, Scott Attaway, “herding” Pines down a long hallway, both just inches away from him.

According to Attaway’s report, Pines taunted the officers while saying he intended to “slow walk” out of the building. The officer wrote that when he ordered Pines to remove his hands from his pockets, he swore at him and refused, which is when the officer said he drew and pointed his Taser at Pines.

McMurrick, meantime, grabbed Pines by the arm while another DAJD officer, identified as Sgt. Steven Whidby, arrived and deployed his Taser, the darts striking Pines’ coat and having no obvious effect, the sergeant wrote. Whidby fired a second set of darts, which again “did not have the desired effect,” the report said. He tried to deploy the device at least three more times. Reports on the incident show Whidby’s Taser was triggered four times in 18 seconds.

Pines was taken to the ground, where officers struck him several times with their fists, claiming he still refused to show his hands.

Kent police were called and they booked Pines into jail and charged him with fourth-degree assault, based on the DAJD officers’ reports, without reviewing security video or otherwise investigating the incident.

What Zenner showed the jury at the criminal trial was that the security video revealed that Pines complied with the officers’ orders, raising his shirt, pulling out his pockets and showing his hands to prove he was unarmed. The lawsuit alleged the exclusion of those facts in their written reports amounted to a “cover-up” to justify their use of force.

The lawsuit and criminal court records showed that video was withheld by the county for more than six months and produced only on the day of trial. The jury acquitted Pines after viewing it.

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HEADLINE	02/03 China warnings stymie Olympians speech
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/world/asia/olympics-china-protests.html

BEIJING — The conversation at the Wukesong Sports Center veered dangerously from the growth and speed of women's hockey toward the question of political statements at the [Olympic Games](#). Hilary Knight, wrapping up practice ahead of her fourth Olympic appearance for the United States, paused, glanced around, and chose her words carefully.

"I think it's important to be able to place value on things that you hold dearest to you, and it's something that is important to me," Knight began. Then she pivoted, saying that her priority was the American team's opening game.

"As of now," she said, "we're specifically focused on Finland."

As competitions began in a Winter Olympics overshadowed by controversy over China's record on human rights, the issue of what participants can and cannot say has loomed larger than at any Olympics in years.

Athletes have found themselves caught between activists urging them to use their celebrity to speak out and the rules of the International Olympic Committee that restrict what they can say and where.

China's Communist Party has also warned that athletes are subject not only to Olympic rules, but also to Chinese law. The warnings have been part of [a crackdown](#) in the weeks before Friday's opening ceremony that, critics say, has had a chilling effect on dissent inside and outside the Olympic bubble.

"Athletes need to be responsible for what they say," Yang Yang, a senior official of the Beijing Organizing Committee and an Olympic champion, said at a news conference this week.

China's warnings have prompted criticism outside the country, including from the State Department in Washington, but inside, the response so far has been a studied self-censorship.

Some national teams, including the United States and Canada, have warned their athletes there is potential legal jeopardy in speaking out — from both the International Olympic Committee and the Chinese judicial system.

When three skiers for Team New Zealand appeared at a news conference in Beijing on Wednesday, a spokesman, Lewis Hampton, cut off a question about the subject of the rules on political statements. The athletes were there to talk about "performance," he said, not protest.

Sophie Richardson, the China director at Human Rights Watch, said she had been contacted by about two dozen Olympic athletes to discuss the lack of free speech in Beijing.

"A lot of people who have either never been to China before or who have, but aren't sure about the circumstances or the environment, have reached out with questions about what they can say or do, what they're concerned about, what the authorities' reactions might be," she said.

Questions about China's human rights record ahead of the Games have simmered for years, as they did before the Summer Olympics in Beijing in 2008. They seemed to take on new urgency last fall when Peng Shuai, the professional tennis player and former Olympian, [accused](#) a top political official of coercing her into a sexual relationship.

Peng's post quickly disappeared from social media and her whereabouts remained a mystery, prompting global outrage. T-shirts with the slogan "[Where is Peng Shuai?](#)" were briefly banned by the Australian Open last month, before officials relented and allowed spectators to wear them.

The question now is whether those shirts — or other forms of protest — will surface at the Beijing Games.

Within the Olympic community, the limits of political speech have become increasingly contested, a debate that has intensified with the Games in China, which routinely ranks among the world's most repressive in surveys on political, religious and other freedoms.

At issue is Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which prohibits athletes or other participants from demonstrating or displaying “political, religious or racial propaganda” at Olympic events. A well-known case when it was invoked was during the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. The American sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith were expelled from the Games after raising their fists on the medals podium during the playing of the U.S. national anthem.

The rule has recently been eased to allow athletes to express their views in Olympic villages and surroundings and on now-ubiquitous social media sites — but still not during competitions or medal ceremonies. The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee went further in 2020, saying it would no longer punish athletes who participated in peaceful protests.

Thomas Bach, the International Olympic Committee president, defended the rule on Thursday, saying that athletes should no more disrupt an Olympic event than a Shakespearean actor would interrupt a performance of “Hamlet” to make a political statement.

“When you engage in an event — the actor in a theater, the athlete in a Games — you have to respect the rules,” he said.

Political activism has surfaced at many international events, including the Tokyo Olympics last summer, but no other host nation has been as strict as China in policing political dissent.

The Chinese Communist Party state has crushed political freedoms in Hong Kong and Tibet and conducted a mass detention and re-education campaign targeting Uyghur Muslims in the western region of Xinjiang that the United States has declared as [genocidal](#).

China’s critics have called on athletes, sponsors and advertisers to speak out. Some have encouraged silent protests, such as skipping the opening ceremony.

“We urge Olympic athletes to take every opportunity to exercise their internationally-recognized right to free speech and speak out against the ongoing genocide of Uyghur Muslims by the Chinese Communist Party,” the Council on American-Islamic Relations, an advocacy group, said in a statement.

The group invoked the legacy of the Summer Olympics held 86 years ago in Adolf Hitler’s Germany. “The world community must prevent a repetition of the 1936 Olympics, which was similarly used by a brutal dictatorship to whitewash its crimes against humanity.”

In fact, protests among Olympic athletes are rare, even among those who may sympathize with human-rights causes. Most athletes are zealously focused on their sport, having devoted years of training to have the chance to compete at the highest level.

A survey last year by the International Olympic Committee reported that roughly two-thirds of athletes believed it was “not appropriate” to demonstrate on the medals podium. Even more opposed protests during the opening ceremony or during competitions themselves.

EU Athletes, a federation that says it represents more than 25,000 elite athletes in Europe, criticized the survey and said that Rule 50 was “not compatible with the human rights of athletes.”

“The idea that a sport organization can restrict or redefine the human rights of athletes is simply unacceptable,” the group said.

Beijing 2022’s organizers have pledged to honor the Olympic Charter’s spirit to allow freedom of speech. Within the “closed loop” bubbles erected around Olympic venues, the authorities have created an open internet not restricted by China’s censorship.

	<p>“Athletes are role models for the world and there is a lot of attention on them,” said Ms. Yang, the Beijing Olympic official. “They have their opinions and if they want to share that, that is important.”</p> <p>In news conferences or interviews, she added, “athletes are free to express their opinions.”</p> <p>So far, most seem reluctant to do so.</p> <p>Knight, a forward on the Olympic hockey team, said the issue of political protest was “not something that necessarily just goes away and you don’t think about it.” She added, “It’s there, for sure.”</p> <p>Joel Johnson, her team’s coach, said that the focus of players was on the sport. “Certainly, we’re not ignoring anything that goes on in the world, but our narrow approach is just to focus on what we can control, and right now, that’s coming to the rink every day and preparing to play.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 NATO welcomes additional US troops
SOURCE	https://www.voanews.com/a/nato-welcomes-additional-us-troops-to-bolster-alliance-s-eastern-flank-/6424721.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on Thursday welcomed U.S. plans to deploy more troops to Europe and said NATO is considering sending additional battle groups to the southeastern part of its alliance amid tensions along the Russia-Ukraine border.</p> <p>Stoltenberg told reporters that while NATO is preparing for the possibility that Russia may take military action, NATO remains ready to engage in “meaningful dialogue” and find a diplomatic resolution to the crisis.</p> <p>“NATO continues to call on Russia to deescalate. Any further Russian aggression would have severe consequences and carry a heavy price,” he said.</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Thursday that the U.S. deployment is heightening tensions in the region.</p> <p>The United States and other Western allies have been preparing economic sanctions to level against Russia in hopes of persuading Russian President Vladimir Putin to pull back the more than 100,000 troops Russia has near the border. Russia has denied it plans to invade Ukraine.</p> <p>Stoltenberg said Thursday there has been a “significant movement of Russian military forces into Belarus,” Ukraine’s northern neighbor where Russia is set to take part in joint military drills this month.</p> <p>“This is the biggest Russian deployment there since the Cold War,” Stoltenberg said.</p> <p>Russia has demanded NATO pull back troops and weapons deployed in eastern European member countries, and to make clear that Ukraine cannot join the 30-member military alliance.</p> <p>NATO and Ukraine have rejected those demands, saying countries are free to pick their allies.</p> <p>But Stoltenberg said Thursday that NATO is ready to talk to Russia about relations between the two sides, and about risk reduction, increased transparency and arms control.</p> <p>Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is meeting Thursday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the latest in a series of visits to Kyiv by world leaders and diplomats to show support for Ukraine and try to advance a peaceful resolution to the crisis.</p> <p>Erdogan has suggested Turkey, a NATO member that also has good relations with Russia, could act as a mediator.</p>

Talks Wednesday between Putin and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson did not provide any breakthroughs. French President Emmanuel Macron was expected to have a phone conversation with Putin later Thursday.

Macron and U.S. President Joe Biden discussed the Russia-Ukraine situation in a call Wednesday, with the White House saying the two leaders reviewed diplomatic efforts and “preparations to impose swift and severe economic costs on Russia should it further invade Ukraine.”

The Norwegian Rights Council also warned Thursday about the effects on those living in eastern Ukraine if the crisis escalates.

After years of violence in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where Ukrainian forces have been battling Russia-backed separatists, the aid organization said the humanitarian needs are already high with nearly 3 million people relying on aid.

Increased fighting “would devastate already damaged civil infrastructure, further restrict peoples’ movements, block access to communities in need, and disrupt essential public services such as water, power, transport and banking,” the NRC said in a statement.

The U.S. said Wednesday it is dispatching 2,000 more troops to Europe, most of them to Poland, and moving 1,000 troops from Germany to Romania to bolster NATO’s eastern flank countries.

The additional U.S. troops, part of the Army’s 82nd Airborne Division, are “not going to fight in Ukraine” in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby told reporters. Rather, he said, they are intended as an “unmistakable signal that we stand with NATO.”

Kirby said the new deployment is not permanent, but that the U.S. could dispatch more troops as warranted. Kirby said the deployment is separate from the 8,500 U.S. troops placed on heightened alert last week for possible dispatch to Europe.

The Defense Department spokesperson said the U.S. still does not believe Putin has “made a decision on invading Ukraine.”

But Kirby said the Russian leader is “showing no signs of being willing to de-escalate” and has continued to add troops in Russian-aligned Belarus to Ukraine’s north and along Russia’s border with eastern Ukraine.

Kirby said the U.S. is “prepared for a range of contingencies” involving Putin’s actions toward Ukraine. The spokesman said the new deployment is “not the sum total of the deterrence.”

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba addressed the conflict in a broader context at a news conference Wednesday, saying, “I’m confident that Russia’s war on Ukraine and wider Europe will ultimately end when two fundamental issues are resolved. First, the West should turn from reactive to proactive strategies when dealing with Russia.”

He added, “Ambiguity on Ukraine’s role as an indivisible part of the West has to be put to an end. The Ukrainian people chose this course and defended it at a high price.”

“We are historically, politically and culturally a part of the West,” Kuleba said. “It is time to end harmful ambiguity which serves as a temptation for the Kremlin to continue its attempts to undermine Ukraine or reverse its course against the will of the Ukrainian people.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 British home energy prices set to rise 54%
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/03/business/stock-market-economy-news#uk-energy-prices-bills-rise

GIST	<p>The price many British households pay for their heat and electricity is set to rise by 54 percent in April, the government's energy regulator, Ofgem, said Thursday. The big jump, caused mainly by a surge of global natural gas prices, is expected to exacerbate concerns over inflation and the cost of living in Britain.</p> <p>The regulator said that for customers paying by direct debit from their bank account, annual charges would increase by 693 pounds (\$940), to £1,971. The big rise will affect about 22 million customers who currently buy energy under a price cap set by the regulator.</p> <p>Ofgem said natural gas prices, which hit record levels in December and remain elevated, had driven the increase. The regulator evaluates the market twice a year and allows energy providers to pass on costs such as increases in the price of gas, a major source of electric power generation, to consumers.</p> <p>"We know this rise will be extremely worrying for many people, especially those who are struggling to make ends meet," said Jonathan Brearley, Ofgem's chief executive, in a statement.</p> <p>Rising energy prices have become a major political issue in many countries, especially in Europe, with governments scrambling to find ways to ease the pain and avoid blowback from voters. The rising prices are also a threat to the effort to reduce carbon emissions, with some lawmakers calling for scrapping so-called green tariffs, extra charges added to bills in Britain and elsewhere to help pay for wind and solar power and other clean energy.</p> <p>The high prices for natural gas have also led to a shake-up among utilities. According to Ofgem, 29 companies with 4.3 million customers have either gone bankrupt or otherwise left the market over the last year. Many of these companies were relatively small, and the wipeout of the sector has led to criticism that Ofgem has been lax in its financial requirements for energy providers. Consumers will be charged for some of the costs incurred by companies in taking on the customers of failed rivals.</p> <p>According to Ofgem, generation costs like the purchase of gas will make up more than half of new energy bills, while green tariffs will come to about 8 percent.</p> <p>On Thursday, immediately after the regulator's announcement, the British government said it would allocate £9.1 billion pounds to help consumers with their bills. Among the measures are a £200 discount customers will receive on their bills beginning in October. The sums would be recovered over the next five years when, the government apparently expects, costs are lower.</p> <p>To critics, these measures fell short. Martin Young, an analyst at Investec, an investment bank, said that natural gas futures indicate that bills might need to surge again to around £2,300 in October, negating the government aid.</p> <p>Greenpeace UK, the environmental group, said the government supports were "devastatingly scant for the poorest households, and aren't sufficiently targeted to those who need them the most."</p> <p>Greenpeace called for new taxes on the profits oil companies are making from booming prices to finance additional relief for consumers.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Uyghur Olympics torchbearer: flame is out
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/3/for-uyghur-torchbearer-chinas-olympic-flame-has-go/
GIST	<p>TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — At the age of 17, Kamaltürk Yalqun was one of several students chosen to help carry the Olympic flame ahead of the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing.</p> <p>Today, he is an activist in the United States calling for a boycott of the upcoming Winter Games over China's treatment of his Uyghur ethnic community.</p> <p>"It seems to me that our sense of global citizenship and sportsmanship is not moving forward with these Olympic Games anymore," Yalqun said in a phone interview from Boston, where he now lives in exile.</p>

In the years since he took part in the Olympic torch relay and later attended the Games as a representative of his home region of Xinjiang, in western China, Beijing has imposed harsh policies on the Muslim Uyghurs, splitting apart Yalqun's own family.

With the Olympic flame set to return to Beijing with Friday's opening ceremony, these Games are attracting renewed global controversy as they spotlight the host country's treatment of the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities. According to researchers, authorities have locked up an estimated 1 million or more members of minority ethnic groups in mass internment camps over the past several years - most of them Uyghurs.

Dan Snyder accused of unwanted sexual advance by former employee
Human rights groups have dubbed these the "Genocide Games," as the U.S. and other countries have cited rights abuses in leading a diplomatic boycott of the event.

China denies any human rights abuses, calling them the "lie of the century." It describes its policies in Xinjiang as a "training program" to combat terrorism.

Yalqun recalls being proud to participate in China's first Olympics. Those feelings vanished after his father disappeared. In 2016, Yalqun Rozi, an editor of books on Uyghur literature, was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison for attempting to "subvert" the Chinese state.

Yalqun never saw his father again - only catching a glimpse of him in a Xinjiang documentary by state broadcaster CGTN five years later. Yalqun moved to the U.S. for graduate school in 2014 and has stayed ever since.

In the past months, Yalqun has regularly joined protests in Boston calling for the boycott of the Winter Games.

In the run up to the 2008 Summer Games - the first ever held in China - Tibetan activists had demonstrated against Beijing's oppression of their community.

Yalqun says he didn't know anything that at the time. All he knew, as high school student who didn't pay attention to politics, was he had a chance to go to the capital and see the Olympics as part of a youth camp.

Xinjiang education officials picked the top students from a handful of schools, who were then interviewed by the Communist Youth League regional chapter for their interpersonal and English skills. When he got a phone call saying he had been selected, Yalqun was elated.

"Whether you were a volunteer, or a torchbearer, or whether you were just attending as an audience (member), everyone was so proud of themselves for being able to be part of the Games," he said.

An Olympics committee in Beijing later selected Yalqun to be a torchbearer as well.

The morning of the run was on a hot July day and went by "in a blink," he said. He and others ran a section that started at the eastern end of the Great Wall on the coast in the city of Qinhuangdao.

"The distance for us to run was very short, maybe 30 meters (100 feet)," he said with a chuckle.

Each runner was given a red, aluminum torch, decorated with a repeating cloud motif. An inner chamber with propane allowed them to catch the flame from the previous bearer.

He got to keep the tall aluminum torch as a souvenir. On the bus to Beijing, he was besieged by curious fellow passengers who asked for a photo. Everyone was caught up in the excitement, he said.

The torch and torchbearer uniform helped smooth things over when the police came to his hotel that night check on him. Police regularly conducted checks on Uyghur travelers in big cities.

His days in Beijing passed quickly. He was one of 70 youths selected to represent China at an Olympic Youth Camp. He made friends with students from other countries as the 400-plus group went on tours of historic sites like the Forbidden City and newly built shopping malls.

The 2008 Games were China's coming out party. The country had grown at a rapid pace and become wealthier. Wide boulevards once choked with bicycles were now jammed with cars.

The tall skyscrapers and wide streets were not the things that impressed Yalqun, but the trees.

"Back then, China didn't pay much attention to the environment. Everywhere it was just concrete and cement, no nature," he said. But he was struck when he saw the green corridor, filled with rows of trees, from the newly built international airport to the city. "I could see greenery everywhere."

These days, Yalqun wants little to do with his home country.

The Olympic flame, which is meant to transmit a message of peace and friendship, has been doused for him. He is disappointed with the current diplomatic boycott, even as it has grown to include Australia, Canada and the UK. He says there should be a full boycott, including by the athletes.

Many heads of state and senior global figures, including U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres and Russian President Vladimir Putin, are expected to attend Friday's opening ceremonies, according to China's Foreign Ministry.

"It should be a collective responsibility when such kind of atrocities are happening," he said. "It's heartbreaking for me to see such a cold response from people."

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HEADLINE	02/03 WA weighs plans: cope w/extreme weather
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/03/pacific-north-west-extreme-weather-plans
GIST	<p>First came the heavy snow in late December that blanketed Seattle and the surrounding area. Then the torrential rain and flooding hit in early January. One by one, four of the region's main mountain passes were deemed impassable, and a 20-mile stretch of Interstate 5 south of Seattle was closed.</p> <p>It was the first time all five had been closed in more than a decade, leaving the Seattle area virtually cut off from cross-state travel.</p> <p>But it was simply the latest in a series of extreme weather events that have pummeled the Pacific north-west over the past year. In the typically mild-weathered state of Washington alone, it began with heavy snowfall last February, followed by dry, scorching temperatures over the summer that left more than 100 people dead, and then a record-breaking fall rain in the Seattle area.</p> <p>Now, with more intense extreme weather expected in the years ahead, driven by the climate crisis, a bipartisan assortment of Washington state lawmakers has simultaneously introduced a handful of bills this legislative session that, rather than focusing on mitigation and emission reduction, focus on climate adaptation.</p> <p>From a proposal to establish a grant program for farmers and ranchers facing damage from flooding and other natural disasters, to adding climate resiliency planning to water system plans, these innovations are intended to prepare the state for the challenges ahead.</p>

“I just think we’re definitely seeing much more extreme weather events and this is going to become the norm, not the one-off,” said Washington senator Mark Mullet, a Democrat, who introduced the proposal to add air conditioners.

He said the legislation was inspired by a conversation with a local firefighter who recalled going on three different calls during the heat dome in late June to homes for seniors and finding residents had died from the heat.

But these proposals also reflect a broader trend taking shape in the last five years, in which the climate movement has increasingly recognized the importance of adaptation, explained Aseem Prakash, professor of political science at the University of Washington and director of the Center for Environmental Politics.

The recent Glasgow climate pact doubled the proportion of climate funds earmarked for adaptation. And in October, the Biden administration released climate adaptation and resilience plans that included building supply chain resiliency and increasing protections for workers and communities when it comes to climate change.

Prakash explained that even if we immediately start drastically reducing emissions, the effects of the climate crisis are already being felt.

“So we have to adapt. I think the climate movement realizes this political and moral necessity to adapt,” he said. “And also, whenever we have floods, extreme heat waves, who suffers? It’s really the poor people, the underprivileged. So there is also a very important climate justice component.”

Justin Allegro, director of state government relations for The Nature Conservancy in Washington, said it’s important that it doesn’t become an either-or situation.

“It doesn’t make sense to only invest in one strategy,” he said. “We know that the impacts of climate change are going to continue to happen and there’s so much we can do as a state to better prepare and better respond and better create resiliency. And at the same time, every effort to fundamentally reduce emissions quickly and rapidly and equitably is something that we need to do.”

In Washington state, Representative Mari Leavitt, a Democrat, introduced a proposal that would create a grant program to help local jurisdictions and federally recognized tribes with the added costs associated with extremely hot or cold weather, as well as unhealthy air quality due to wildfires.

She explained that the grants would be flexible to accommodate each area’s distinct needs, but could be used for such things as adding additional cooling shelters and HVAC systems, or even simply providing more fans and water for those in need.

“Those extreme weather events will continue,” she said. “And we just weren’t ready and the resources weren’t available, so cooling centers were getting open later, and for limited periods of time.”

She gave the example of a cooling center in Lakewood, Washington, about 40 miles south-west of Seattle, which wasn’t set up until a few days after the heatwave started and despite firefighters trying to drop people off in the morning, didn’t open its doors until noon.

“I asked the question, ‘Why did it take so long?’ The response I got back was, ‘We were trying to figure out the resources in order to open,’” she said.

Another proposal being considered is the outdoor recreation and climate adaptation (Orca) plan, which would direct the projected \$4.4bn in revenue between 2023 and 2032 through the state’s recently passed Climate Commitment Act to climate adaptation and outdoor recreation. Currently, the majority of those funds are designated to emission-reducing transportation programs, given the central role it plays in the state’s greenhouse gas emissions.

	<p>Washington representative Mary Dye, a Republican who is behind the Orca plan, said instead the funds should be used for such things as building structures to protect communities from catastrophic floods and improving forest health to reduce wildfires.</p> <p>“I think that you have to get real and be honest and do good things today that will help our state really be able to adapt to the things that are before us,” she said.</p> <p>But these proposals are still fairly targeted and, apart from Orca, do not have a huge price tag, explained Prakash.</p> <p>“I hope it comes up even more forcefully, because this is an issue we have to confront,” he said. “And this is not to say we should not mitigate. We should certainly mitigate. But we also have to start taking adaptation more seriously, which we haven’t.”</p> <p>Nick Bond, the Washington state climatologist, said it’s clear the state could have done a better job when it came to responding to these extreme weather events.</p> <p>He said: “Hopefully we can learn from it so that when the next one comes along there won’t be as much loss of life, and to figure out just what we can do to reach those folks that don’t have the resources to get themselves out of a threatening situation.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Border policy expelling migrants remains
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/immigration-us-border-policy-expelling-migrants-cdc-covid-19/
GIST	<p>After a recent internal review, the Biden administration decided to maintain a pandemic-era order put in place under former President Donald Trump that authorizes the rapid deportation of migrants from the U.S.-Mexico border, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) told CBS News Thursday.</p> <p>Since March 2020, the Trump and Biden administrations have expelled migrants over 1.5 million times without affording them the opportunity to request U.S. asylum, citing a series of CDC orders that argue the expulsions are needed to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 in border processing facilities.</p> <p>The latest order authorizing the border expulsions, signed by CDC Director Rochelle Walensky in August 2021, instructed public health officials to evaluate the need for the policy every 60 days. Two reviews last fall led the agency to keep the order in place.</p> <p>On Thursday, a CDC spokesperson said the agency decided to continue invoking the expulsion authority, known as Title 42, after a third 60-day assessment that was due on February 2.</p> <p>"At this time, it remains in effect," the spokesperson told CBS News, referring to the Title 42 order. "The current reassessment examined the present impact of the pandemic throughout the United States and at the U.S. borders, taking special note of the surge in cases and hospitalizations since December due to the highly transmissible Omicron variant."</p> <p>The CDC, the spokesperson noted, "continues to emphasize the need for testing, vaccination, and other mitigation measures at border facilities beyond the use of the Order."</p> <p>The unprecedented Title 42 policy, initially instituted over the objections of CDC officials, has allowed the U.S. to "expel" migrants to Mexico or their home countries without allowing them to see a judge or an asylum officer, safeguards in U.S. law the government has argued it can suspend during a global pandemic.</p> <p>Last summer, Biden administration officials proposed vaccinating migrants against the coronavirus as part of a plan to wind down the Title 42 expulsions, according to government documents obtained by CBS News. But the plan was shelved after high-ranking officials, including top White House aide Susan Rice,</p>

warned it could trigger more migrant arrivals at the U.S. border, people familiar with the deliberations said.

To date, U.S. officials have not offered coronavirus vaccinations to most migrants who enter border custody.

The Biden administration's decision to retain the Trump-era expulsions has alarmed human rights groups, [public health experts](#) and advocates for asylum-seekers, who are challenging the policy in federal court.

But the Biden administration has vigorously [defended](#) the emergency order, telling a federal court earlier this month that its termination would pose a "serious danger" to the public health of U.S. communities.

At this point, the Biden administration has enforced Title 42 for over a year, longer than the Trump administration. It has carried out over 1 million migrant expulsions in 11 months, compared to 400,000 expulsions during Trump's last year in office, according U.S. Customs and Border Protection [data](#).

But the Biden administration has also faced a record increase in migrant arrests at the U.S. southern border. And a larger percentage of migrants were processed under regular immigration procedures, which allow them to seek asylum, in 2021 than in 2020, when the start of the pandemic suppressed migration.

Unlike the Trump administration, the Biden administration has declined to use Title 42 to expel unaccompanied children, most of whom are being transferred to government shelters in the U.S. interior, as required by a 2008 law.

Most migrants processed under Title 42 are turned back by land to Mexico within hours, while a limited number are placed on deportation flights to Central America or other countries in the Western Hemisphere, including Haiti and Brazil.

Because Mexico has formally only agreed to accept its own citizens and migrants from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador under Title 42, U.S. authorities have struggled to apply the expulsion policy to migrants from Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba, who journeyed to the U.S. in record numbers last year.

The Biden administration this month started expelling some Venezuelan migrants to Colombia under Title 42. In a statement, DHS said U.S. expulsion flights to Colombia transporting Venezuelans who used to live there will continue on a "regular basis."

New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez, a fellow Democrat, implored President Biden this week to "reverse this cruel course of action," calling deportations of Venezuelans to Colombia "unconscionable."

"Ultimately, the use of Title 42 deprives legitimate asylum seekers of their legal right to seek asylum and pursue their claims in the U.S., and its extended use has created unsafe conditions for vulnerable migrants, increased the number of dangerous border crossings, and has prevented the Biden Administration from fulfilling its early commitment to restore access to asylum," Menendez said in a statement Tuesday.

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HEADLINE	02/04 Olympic bosses' business links to China
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/john-coates-dick-pound-and-seb-coes-business-links-to-china-exposed?ref=home
GIST	<p>Recent weeks and months have seen members of the International Olympic Committee defend the organization's approach to human rights issues in China. A deep dive into their business interests suggests that, for some IOC members, the links to Beijing go beyond sport.</p> <p>IOC Vice President John Coates recently explained that "the IOC does place a very high emphasis on human rights." It's just that pressuring Beijing about Xinjiang is not in the IOC's "remit."</p>

“We have to respect the sovereignty of the countries who are hosting the Games,” he said.

Whether Coates, who is also president of the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC), places a “very high emphasis on human rights” in his own business affairs is another question.

Research by The Daily Beast suggests deep business ties between China—including Xinjiang province where a genocide of the Uyghur minority is allegedly taking place—and the company where he is chairman.

Coates’s official IOC profile does not mention that since 2007 he has served as chairman of William Inglis & Son Ltd., an Australian thoroughbred horse auctioneer.

Inglis is a serious business—its [complex](#) in Sydney contains a large five-star hotel complete with café, gym, and pool, plus 800 stables, where it hosts auctions.

China has been an important growth market for Inglis for [over a decade](#). Although the most recent races were interrupted by the pandemic, the company sponsors a China-Australia horse racing cup that takes place in Shanxi. In interviews with Chinese publications, Inglis’s China representative Tian Jin has described how the cup is Inglis’s highest-prize-money event outside of Australia.

Tian also mentions the participation in Inglis’s cup of horses from Xinjiang. Chinese sources suggest that Inglis has organized the sale of a number of horses to at least one major Xinjiang owner and breeder. The province, home to the Uyghurs, plays an important part in China’s horse industry, with Chinese tycoons [setting up](#) stables and breeding and training programmes there.

The promotion of Xinjiang’s [“horse culture”](#) is a staple of state media propaganda. This effort is connected via a broader campaign of cultural sanitization to the repression of local customs deemed more ‘extremist,’ such as [alcohol](#) abstinence, [Halal](#) food consumption, the [wearing](#) of beards, and other practices.

The Daily Beast found that, at [one Inglis sale](#) in 2019, horses worth over \$3.5 million were sold to the [“secretive”](#) China Horse Club, which has attracted [scrutiny](#) for its mysterious membership and ownership structures. A further A\$1.5 million [U.S.\$1 million] worth of horses were sold to the club at another auction last year.

In total, Inglis’s auctions last year saw horses worth A\$18,861,500 over [US\$13 million] sold to buyers based in China.

A spokesman for Inglis declined to comment. Coates told The Daily Beast that the quotes cited above “reflect the IOC’s and my position on human rights in China.”

He said: “My IOC profile details my various sporting positions and does not list the numerous commercial directorships I have had over the years. The AOC Annual Report lists all current directorships. It includes being Chair of William Inglis & Son Ltd. I have no further comment.”

Coates is not the only of the IOC’s 101 members to have hit back at suggestions that the organization might do anything to apply pressure to Beijing with regard to human rights abuse.

“[The IOC] has no role to play in bringing about political change... Human rights issues are political,” insisted Canadian member Dick Pound in response to questions about internment camps and ethnic cleansing in Xinjiang. Confessing his complete ignorance of issues in the western Chinese province in an [interview with German radio](#), Pound provided little assurance that athletes would be free to discuss these issues without consequences whilst in China.

“It would be helpful if there was an independent review of what was going on” in Xinjiang, Pound suggested fancifully, “...and maybe that’s a step that the Chinese would be prepared to consider.”

Pound's apparent naivety about the possibility of China's one-party state conducting an "independent review" into the Uyghurs' plight belies his own otherwise informed interest in the country.

The Canadian law firm where Pound serves as a counsel, Stikeman Elliott LLP, has a deep and long-running stake in Chinese commerce. Stikeman's website boasts of having acted for "many well-known Chinese companies," before reeling off a list of top state-owned companies, some of the largest corporations in the world.

The Daily Beast has obtained a copy of a book written by Pound and published in 2013, in which he boasts of the firm's extensive business ties to China.

"The firm had always had an interest in China, going back to the 1980s," wrote Pound. "As China began to extend its reach and interests abroad, we engaged a former Canadian ambassador to China, Harold Balloch, for two years, 2005-6, to help us develop a more concerted approach to the Chinese market.

"This led to the development, beginning in November 2007, of the firm's China initiative, with a focus on bringing work from China to Canada... The China interest group now has more than sixty members within the firm." Pound goes on to discuss lucrative headline cases, the art of networking in China, and the firm's strategy of marketing in Chinese propaganda outlets.

Pound told the Daily Beast: "Neither my firm nor its Asian involvement have any connection whatsoever with my personal views on the proper role of the IOC and/or its relationship with China."

China's government sent a [clear message](#) to the Western legal profession last year, when it sanctioned the entirety of a British barristers' chambers after four of its members wrote a legal opinion that events in Xinjiang might constitute genocide. The sanctions resulted in several barristers leaving the main London branch, along with six more from its Singapore affiliate. Pound said he had no knowledge of China's retaliation against lawyers who speak out against its human rights record.

"My views on the limitations of the IOC to bring about conduct change on the part of the Chinese government have absolutely no connection with Stikeman Elliott," he said.

IOC members' apparent business ties with China don't stop there. Last November, British member Sebastian Coe [described](#) the growing diplomatic boycott of the Games as "a meaningless gesture and a damaging gesture."

Private Eye magazine responded by reporting that Coe earns more than \$130,000 a year as a non-executive director of Fortescue Metals Group, an Australian mining company that received 90 percent of its multi-billion dollar turnover from China in 2020.

Not only that, a Chinese state-owned firm owns a large stake in the company.

Fortescue's spokesman confirmed that the company was deeply entwined with the Chinese market.

"Fortescue's success and that of the Australian economy has been largely built on China's remarkable growth... Fortescue has built longstanding relationships in China that extend beyond the supply of iron ore and include procurement, financing arrangements, academic, policy and social linkages, as well as the highly successful direct investment in Fortescue by our second largest shareholder, Hunan Valin Steel Group."

"Lord Sebastian Coe CH, KBE, is a key member of Fortescue's talented and diverse Board that is committed to enhancing and protecting the interests of both shareholders and stakeholders."

In his role at the International Olympic Committee, Coe—who also runs world athletics—has the opportunity to meet top Chinese politicians and business figures. Fortescue's spokesperson explained,

	<p>however, that Coe “has been really against countries boycotting the Olympics” for 40 years and that his stance against boycotts has nothing to do with Beijing 2022 in particular.</p> <p>That is just as well, as China has shown how forcefully it will respond to any criticism from Australia. In 2020, in response to Australian calls for a free inquiry into the origins of the novel coronavirus, Beijing slapped tariffs and other trade barriers on Australian wine, barley, seafood, and coal.</p> <p>The IOC’s president, Thomas Bach, himself attracted criticism during his campaign to lead the organization. One rival, a Swiss lawyer, insisted of Bach that “he uses his position to his benefit so that he can gain contracts for the companies he represents,” before apologizing after apparent pressure from the IOC’s Ethics Commission.</p> <p>The IOC press office told The Daily Beast that they had reached out to Denis Oswald, the member from Switzerland, and explained that he had provided the following quote: <i>“When I realized that my comments were misinterpreted and taken out of context, I decided without any pressure to withdraw them.”</i></p> <p>The commission assesses members’ possible conflicts of interest in private, without publicizing submissions or findings. An IOC spokesman said: “The IOC has a system for addressing conflicts of interests which meets international standards and is best in class for sports organisations.”</p> <p>In fulfilling their IOC roles, members enjoy private meetings with dignitaries, tycoons and politicians from all over the world.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/04 Spain to drop masks outdoors mandate
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/spain-drop-masks-outdoors-omicron-surge-decelerates-82667720
GIST	<p>MADRID -- Spain will end a mandate to wear masks outdoors next week, reversing a late December order against an unprecedented surge of coronavirus infections fueled by a highly contagious mutation, Health Minister Carolina Darias said.</p> <p>After confirming that contagion levels have peaked, the Spanish Cabinet will end the mandate next Tuesday and the government expects the changes to be adopted from Thursday, Feb. 10, Darias told Cadena SER radio on Friday.</p> <p>Mask wearing will remain mandatory in indoor public spaces, including public transportation, and outdoors whenever citizens can’t keep a safe distance of 1.5 meters between them.</p> <p>The outdoor mandate, adopted on Dec. 22 as many were preparing to reunite with loved ones on Christmas, was the government's main response to the spread of omicron.</p> <p>The decision was criticized by some experts as a cosmetic move that had little effect in halting contagion.</p> <p>Official health ministry data shows how the spread of the virus gained speed in November and peaked on Jan. 21 at 3,418 new infections per 100,000 residents in two weeks, a pandemic record. Contagion has since slowed down and the 14-day figure dropped by 1,000 infections per 100,000 residents on Thursday, to 2,420.</p> <p>Authorities credit a strong vaccination rate of nearly 81% of the 47 million population for a lower admission rate of people with COVID-19 in hospitals than in previous infection surges.</p> <p>Spain has officially recorded just over 94,000 deaths linked to COVID-19.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Virulent HIV variant unrecognized for years
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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/study-identifies-virulent-hiv-variant-unrecognized-years-82653664
GIST	<p>Scientists have found a previously unrecognized variant of HIV that's more virulent than usual and has quietly circulated in the Netherlands for the past few decades.</p> <p>Thursday's report isn't cause for alarm: HIV medicines worked just as well in people with the mutated virus as everyone else and its spread has been declining since about 2010. It was discovered as part of efforts to better understand how HIV continues to evolve.</p> <p>The finding emphasizes the importance of good access to testing and treatment so that whatever the variety, "HIV is suppressed as quickly as possible, which prevents transmission," Oxford University epidemiologist Christophe Fraser, the study's senior author, said in a statement.</p> <p>Different HIV subtypes circulate in different countries, some more severe or transmissible than others. Subtype B is the most common in the U.S. and Western Europe. The Oxford team spotted 17 unusual cases while studying a database of European HIV patients -- people who had more immune damage and were more infectious when they were diagnosed than is typical for subtype B.</p> <p>Since all but two of those cases were from the Netherlands, the researchers next combed through thousands of Dutch records. They eventually identified a cluster of 109 people infected with what they're calling the VB variant, for virulent subtype B.</p> <p>The cases date back to the 1990s and early 2000s, and have declined more recently, the researchers reported Thursday in the journal Science.</p> <p>Before treatment, people with the VB variant had far more virus in their blood and suffered more immune system damage than people with other HIV variants, the study found. It's not clear which of many viral genetic changes are the cause, but after treatment they fared the same as other HIV patients.</p> <p>Finding this type of variant "is not a public health crisis," Joel Wertheim, a viral evolution expert at the University of California, San Diego, cautioned in an accompanying Science editorial. He wasn't part of the Oxford research.</p> <p>It "does not appear to have led to a spike" in HIV cases, Wertheim said in an email interview. But the finding highlights how much is left to learn about why a long-spreading virus "still has the potential to evolve and adapt. As this current pandemic continues to remind us, we shouldn't underestimate the potential for viral adaptation."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/04 Hong Kong activist arrest ahead of protest
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/hong-kong-activist-arrested-ahead-olympics-protest-82667050
GIST	<p>HONG KONG -- A veteran Hong Kong activist was arrested Friday, days after he announced plans to protest the Beijing Winter Olympics outside government offices in the city, according to local media.</p> <p>The activist, Koo Sze-yiu, was arrested in the early morning at his home under a national security law, according to local newspaper South China Morning Post.</p> <p>Earlier this week, Koo had sent a media announcement inviting coverage of a petition he planned to present on Friday at 10 a.m. in front of China's Liaison Office — the agency which represents the Chinese government in the nominally semi-autonomous enclave.</p> <p>In his invite, Koo stated that China had pressed on with the Beijing Winter Games while ignoring "unjust" cases of imprisonment in Hong Kong.</p>

“Don’t forget that human rights are being oppressed in Hong Kong!” he wrote in the announcement.

He said that authorities have abused the national security law to imprison dissidents or those who speak out against Beijing's policies in the city.

Koo designed his media statement with interspersed bold and enlarged letters that read “Coffin Winter Olympics.”

Over 150 people have been arrested under Hong Kong's national security law since it was implemented in June 2020. Before that, Koo took part in protests where he would help carry a mock coffin outside China's Liaison Office in demonstrations held on the Chinese National Day of Oct. 1.

Koo had previously been arrested and jailed several times, after being convicted of taking part in unauthorized rallies and flag desecration.

Local media reports also stated that four others — three men and a woman — were questioned in Koo's case, but were not formally charged.

The 2020 law criminalizes what it describes as secession, subversion, and other offenses against the state. Rights groups, foreign governments and activists have condemned the law for reversing the freedoms promised to Hong Kong when Britain handed it over to China in 1997.

Last year, some 47 activists were charged with conspiring to subvert state power under the national security law, following their participation in an unofficial primary election aimed at selecting legislature candidates for the pro-democracy camp.

Authorities claimed that the primary was “subversion”, as some of the activists indicated that they would vote down major bills in the legislature that would force Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam to step down, if the pro-democracy candidates won a majority.

Most of the city's prominent pro-democracy activists are currently in jail or have fled overseas in fear of political persecution.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Scientists demand Covid origins probe
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/scientists-demand-investigation-covid-19-origins-ahead-beijing/story?id=82650383
GIST	<p>With the Beijing Olympics set to begin, a group of international scientists is once more calling for a "comprehensive international investigation" into the origins of COVID-19.</p> <p>It's the latest in a series of strongly worded letters demanding more transparency from the Chinese government, once again stoking a contentious debate that's been ongoing throughout the pandemic's many months.</p> <p>The letter -- signed by 20 scientists from the U.S., U.K., Germany, New Zealand, France, Australia, India and Japan -- echoes what have become broad international calls for a more thorough examination, unfettered by geopolitics, into where COVID-19 came from. It also underscores continued criticism from both the U.S. and international bodies over the Chinese government's lack of cooperation.</p> <p>"The Olympic Charter states that 'The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity,'" wrote the scientist group, co-organized by Jamie Metzl, a former WHO adviser and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council. "Unfortunately, as athletes from across the globe gather together today for the start of the 2022 Beijing Olympic Winter Games, this noble aspiration is being undermined</p>

through the ongoing efforts of the host government to prevent a comprehensive international investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Increased and united scrutiny into COVID-19's origins is "a true representation of the ideals underlying the Olympic movement," the letter said, and would "promote openness and mutual trust," especially at a time when the world's athletes convene upon Beijing.

Failing to understand how the virus -- which is now responsible for claiming the lives of more than 5.7 million people worldwide -- leaves "everyone on earth and future generations ... at heightened and unnecessary risk of future pandemics," the letter said.

No firm conclusion has yet been made as to [where COVID-19 came from](#), with international health and U.S. intelligence bodies [stalled between two theories](#): whether the virus emerged from natural animal spillover, or whether it came from an accidental lab experiment leak in Wuhan, China.

Following President Joe Biden's 90-day push this summer for his intel agencies to "redouble their efforts" in uncovering a more definitive conclusion on COVID-19's origins, the intelligence community has remained "divided" on its most likely origins. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence, in its report, underscored the barriers to finding any concrete answers -- namely, unhelpful noncooperation from the Chinese government, which is "likely to impede investigation."

A World Health Organization-led team also emphasized that there must be more sharing of records, samples and raw data for any real progress to take place.

The WHO's first phase study into COVID-19's origins, which deemed a lab leak "extremely unlikely," faced [a barrage of questions](#) on issues of access and transparency. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said there was more work to be done and the assessment had not been "extensive enough."

Months later, Tedros acknowledged it had been "premature" to rule out the lab leak theory so soon and stressed that they needed China's cooperation with raw data from their labs to help rule out the lab leak theory.

The UN health agency has formed a new team of scientists for a new phase of investigation that included lab audits -- which the Chinese government rejected, saying they could not accept needless "repetitive research" when "clear conclusions" had already been reached.

Without a fresh flow of that robust information, the debate over COVID-19's origins has remained shrouded in a haze of circumstantial evidence.

"The fact is that they're just not, they're just not being transparent," Biden said of China at his news conference earlier this month, adding that he "made it clear" to President Xi Jinping during their November summit that "China had an obligation to be more forthcoming on exactly what the source of the virus was."

Meanwhile, Beijing has vehemently denied the virus could have come from one of its labs, pressing for the investigation to look outside China. Chinese authorities have suggested, without evidence, that the virus was already spreading in the United States prior to late 2019 -- attempting to move the sharp focus on Wuhan's early viral clusters to a conspiracy theory that COVID-19 came from a U.S. Army lab.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian tweeted in March 2020 that "it might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan," claiming that American military athletes who attended the World Military Games in Wuhan in October 2019 could have been responsible for bringing COVID-19 into China.

U.S. Department of Defense officials pushed firmly back on the accusation, calling it "misinformation and disinformation," and Chad Sbragia, the then-Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China, called claims that the virus began with a U.S. Army service member "patently false and, frankly, unhelpful."

	<p>Experts say it could take years to find COVID-19's origins, even with full international cooperation and an intact trail of scientific evidence. It took scientists more than a decade to identify the bat population that was the home of a 2002 SARS epidemic.</p> <p>Even so, they also underscore that understanding where and how this pandemic started may be crucial to preventing the next one.</p> <p>"Understanding how this terrible crisis began is essential to preventing future pandemics," the letter said, "and building a safer future for all."</p>
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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	02/03 NSA touts collaboration wins
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/nsa-touts-collaboration-wins-following-year-of-massive-hacks/
GIST	<p>After a year marked by several unprecedented hacks, the National Security Agency's Cybersecurity Directorate on Thursday issued an annual report to showcase its collaboration within the federal government and the U.S. private sector and warn that the digital threat landscape remains volatile.</p> <p>The directorate, established in 2019, was created as a part of an overarching shift by the NSA — once nicknamed “No Such Agency” — to share its technical expertise with the public and private sectors about the kind of attacks hackers are launching and help organizations better defend against digital assaults from nation states like Russia, China and Iran — all of whom continue to improve their tradecraft.</p> <p>Last year was roiled by rapid, sweeping cyberattacks, beginning with the SolarWinds espionage campaign that impacted at least nine federal agencies to the ransomware strikes on the Colonial Pipeline, food processing giant JBS and software firm Kaseya before concluding with the discovery of the massive Log4j vulnerability that sent entities around the globe scrambling to button up their networks.</p> <p>In a letter prefacing the annual report, NSA Cybersecurity Directorate chief Rob Joyce warned that the specter of online threats is likely to grow.</p> <p>“Our adversaries and cyber criminals continue to push limits in cyberspace, creating more national security threats than we have ever seen,” according to Joyce, who previously served as senior advisor for cybersecurity strategy to the NSA director.</p> <p>He added that malicious actors are “targeting all levels of U.S. Government, critical infrastructure, industry, academia, private citizens and our allies. This is a shared threat that requires us all to work as a coalition with a common goal.”</p> <p>Figures from the 28-page annual report:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since it was established in 2019 the directorate has issued over 50 “actionable” cybersecurity reports, collaborating with other federal organizations like the FBI and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) as well as Five Eyes partner nations. • The NSA's Cybersecurity Collaboration Center (CCC) — a 36,000-square-foot unclassified space stood up in 2020 just over the intelligence agency's fence line — has grown its roster of private industry partners from 10 to over 110. • The CCC's Protective Domain Name System (PDNS) pilot processed more than 3.8 billion queries and blocked more than 6.5 million malicious domains, including “known nation-state spear-phishing, botnets and malware.” The center also provided PDNS services to 40 defense industrial base contractors and “expects to scale to hundreds more in the coming year.” • As U.S. forces withdrew from Afghanistan last summer, the NSA created a one-page visual guide to identify 27 “current and commonly fielded forms of high assurance communications security

	(COMSEC) devices” used by the military and intelligence agencies so that they could be removed from the country not “end up in the wrong hands.”
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HEADLINE	02/04 Hackers breached China National Games
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/hackers-breached-chinas-national-games-ahead-of-last-years-competition/
GIST	<p>An unidentified hacking group has gained access to the internal IT network of the 2021 National Games of China.</p> <p>The competition, which took place in September 2021 in the city of Shaanxi, is an internal sporting event for Chinese athletes only, modeled after the rules of the Olympic Games and the event where national champions are crowned across different sporting events.</p> <p>Avast said that roughly 12 days before the event’s start, unknown attackers gained access to a public server and an SQL database belonging to the event’s organizers and proceeded to install web shells so they could access systems at later points.</p> <p>“After gaining access, the attackers tried to move through the network using exploits and bruteforcing services in an automated way,” Avast said in a report published on Thursday.</p> <p>To achieve lateral movement, Avast said the attackers used an exploitation framework written in the Go programming language that included plugins for several known vulnerabilities.</p> <p>The security firm said it learned of the incident from an incident response report that contained details about the breach its researchers found on VirusTotal, a web platform owned by Google where users can upload and scan files for malware.</p> <p>“Based on the initial information from the report and our own findings, it appears the breach was successfully resolved prior to the start of the games,” Avast added.</p> <p>The Czech security firm said it was unable to determine what information the hackers stole but said that they “have reason to believe [the attackers] are either native Chinese-language speakers or show high fluency in Chinese.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/04 Cloud-computing spending hits milestone
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/cloud-computing-spending-just-hit-another-huge-milestone/
GIST	<p>Businesses globally spent \$53.5 billion on cloud infrastructure in the fourth quarter of 2021, hitting the milestone for the first time and bringing full-year spending to \$191.7 billion, or nearly \$50 billion more than in 2020.</p> <p>As usual, the big three dominated cloud infrastructure spending, accounting for 61% of the \$53.5 billion in Q4 2021, according to analyst Canalys.</p> <p>Amazon Web Services had a 33% share, followed by Microsoft Azure's 22%, and Google Cloud's 9%. Other cloud providers took 36%.</p> <p>Growth followed the standard order, too: though still a loss-making part of Alphabet, Google Cloud revenues grew fastest at 63% year on year, followed by Azure's 46%, and AWS's 40%. Signaling the industry's maturity, cloud infrastructure spending year-on-year growth has slowed from 2018 levels of around 50% to this quarter's 34%.</p> <p>Canalys' cloud infrastructure spending update follows Amazon's Q4 2021 earnings report on Thursday. While Amazon missed analyst estimates, its giant AWS subsidiary's revenues grew 40% year on year to \$17.78 billion, leaving it with a \$71 billion revenue run rate.</p>

	<p>Alphabet this week reported Q4 2021 Google Cloud revenue grew 45% year over year, but it's still working to trim back its quarterly operating losses that historically have exceeded \$1 billion. This quarter the loss was \$890 million, down from the huge \$1.24 billion loss in Q4 2020.</p> <p>Microsoft last month boasted that growth in "the number of larger, long-term Azure contracts" powered its cloud growth of 46% in fiscal Q2 2022.</p> <p>Canalys sees the so-called metaverse and related augmented and virtual reality technologies driving cloud services spending and infrastructure deployment over the next decade.</p> <p>While the metaverse is still being hashed out, Canalys sees use cases for the burgeoning virtual world in gaming, social media, workplace collaboration, education, real estate, ecommerce and digital commerce. Whatever it will become, it's all good news for cloud providers.</p> <p>"Compute will be in high demand in virtual and augmented reality environments, while storage, machine learning, IoT and data analytics will be essential to support operations such as digital twinning, modeling and interactivity in the metaverse," said Canalys research analyst, Blake Murray.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 State Dept. condemns Red Cross hack
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/state-department-red-cross-cybarattack-breach-humanitarian/
GIST	<p>The U.S. State Department said the hack of the International Committee of the Red Cross last month was a "dangerous development" that has harmed the organization's family re-unification mission.</p> <p>The commentary from Foggy Bottom comes in response to a Jan. 19 announcement from the Red Cross that a cyberattack compromised personal data for more than half a million people from at least 60 Red Cross and associated Red Crescent national organizations across the globe.</p> <p>"Targeting the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's sensitive and confidential data is a dangerous development," said Ned Price, a spokesman for the State Department. "It has real consequences: this cyber incident has harmed the global humanitarian network's ability to locate missing people and reconnect families. This is why it is so vital that humanitarian data be respected and only used for intended purposes."</p> <p>Price also called on other nations to join the State Department and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in condemning the attack.</p> <p>"To ensure states and vulnerable people can continue to trust and rely on the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement for the help they need, states should join the ICRC in raising the alarm about this breach," he said.</p> <p>The U.S. plea to rally follows others who have pushed for an international response to the incident. It's not yet clear who was behind the attack, but the ICRC said in an update afterward that it was targeted specifically its own servers and not the Swiss company hosting them.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/04 'Western govt. entity' in Ukraine targeted
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/russian-gamaredon-hackers-targeted.html
GIST	<p>The Russia-linked Gamaredon hacking group attempted to compromise an unnamed Western government entity operating in Ukraine last month amidst ongoing geopolitical tensions between the two countries.</p> <p>Palo Alto Networks' Unit 42 threat intelligence team, in a new report publicized on February 3, said that the phishing attack took place on January 19, adding it "mapped out three large clusters of their infrastructure used to support different phishing and malware purposes."</p>

The threat actor, also known as Shuckworm, Armageddon, or Primitive Bear, has historically focused its offensive cyber attacks against Ukrainian government officials and organizations since 2013. Last year, Ukraine [disclosed](#) the collective's ties to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).

To carry out the phishing attack, the operators behind the campaign leveraged a job search and employment platform within the country as a conduit to upload their malware downloader in the form of a resume for an active job listing related to the targeted entity.

"Given the steps and precision delivery involved in this campaign, it appears this may have been a specific, deliberate attempt by Gamaredon to compromise this Western government organization," the researchers noted.

Additionally, Unit 42 uncovered evidence of a Gamaredon campaign targeting the State Migration Service (SMS) of Ukraine on December 1, 2021, which used a Word document as a lure to install the open-source [UltraVNC](#) virtual network computing (VNC) software for maintaining remote access to infected computers.

"Gamaredon actors pursue an interesting approach when it comes to building and maintaining their infrastructure," researchers said. "Most actors choose to discard domains after their use in a cyber campaign in order to distance themselves from any possible attribution. However, Gamaredon's approach is unique in that they appear to recycle their domains by consistently rotating them across new infrastructure."

Taken together, the attack infrastructure spans across no fewer than 700 rogue domains, 215 IP addresses, and over 100 samples of malware, with the clusters used to host weaponized documents that are engineered to execute malicious code when opened and serve as command-and-control servers for its [Pterodo](#) (aka Pteranodon) remote access trojan.

The findings arrive less than a week after Broadcom-owned Symantec [revealed details](#) of another attack orchestrated by the same group between July and August 2021 targeting an unidentified Ukrainian organization to deploy the Pterodo RAT for post-exploitation activities.

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HEADLINE	02/03 China APT new custom backdoor 'xPack'
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/state-hackers-new-malware-helped-them-stay-undetected-for-250-days/
GIST	<p>A state-backed Chinese APT actor tracked as 'Antlion' has been using a new custom backdoor called 'xPack' against financial organizations and manufacturing companies.</p> <p>The malware has been used in a campaign against targets in Taiwan that researchers believe spanned for more than 18 months, between 2020 and 2021, allowing the adversaries to run stealthy cyber-espionage operations.</p> <p>According to a report from Symantec, a Broadcom company, shared with BleepingComputer, xPack enabled attackers to run WMI commands remotely, to leverage EternalBlue exploits, and mounted shares over SMB to deliver data to the command and control (C2) server.</p> <p>In the network for 250 days</p> <p>Details from one attack show that the threat actor spent 175 days on the compromised network. However, Symantec researchers analyzing two other attacks determined that the adversary went undetected on the network for as long as 250 days.</p> <p>Using custom malware unknown to threat analysts played a key role in achieving this level of stealthiness.</p>

xPack is a .NET loader that fetches and executes AES-encrypted payloads, while it's also capable to execute system commands and stage data for exfiltration.

Symantec also spotted the following custom tools that accompanied xPack in this campaign:

- **EHAGBPSL** – Custom C++ loader
- **JpgRun** – Custom C++ loader
- **CheckID** – Custom C++ loader based on a similar tool used by the BlackHole RAT
- **NetSessionEnum** – Custom SMB session enumeration tool
- **ENCODE MMC** – Custom bind/reverse file transfer tool
- Kerberos golden ticket tool based on the Mimikatz credentials stealer

Antlion also used various off-the-shelf and living-off-the-land (LoL) tools in combination with the above to achieve full operational capability without raising security flags.

Tools such as PowerShell, WMIC, ProcDump, LSASS, and PsExec were common in this campaign, leaving crumbs of evidence that easily blend with ordinary operating system functions.

Finally, the actors were also observed leveraging CVE-2019-1458 for privilege escalation and remote scheduling that helped execute the backdoor.

This vulnerability was [recently](#) included on CISA's list of actively exploited flaws, so it's still an attractive avenue for multiple adversaries.

"There is also evidence that the attackers likely automated the data collection process via batch scripts, while there is also evidence of instances where data was likely staged for further exfiltration, though it was not actually observed being exfiltrated from the network," [explains Symantec](#)

"In these instances, it appears the attackers were interested in collecting information from software pertaining to business contacts, investments, and smart card readers."

In the attacks dissected by Symantec's analysts, xPack was initially used to collect basic system information and running processes, and then for dumping credentials.

Afterwards, the actors returned periodically and launched xPack again to steal account credentials from several machines in the compromised organizations.

Antlion still active and dangerous

Antlion is believed to be involved in cyber-espionage activities since at least 2011, so this is an actor that has remained a threat to organizations for over a decade now.

Its interest in targeting Taiwanese firms has political extensions and is in line with the operational strategy of most Chinese state-sponsored groups.

As detailed in Symantec's report, the particular campaign focused on dumping credentials from the compromised systems and then using them to move laterally.

It's possible that Antlion shared these credentials with other Chinese hacker groups that had a different operational focus, as it is common for actors working for the same state to collaborate.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Billions of brute-force, phishing blocked
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/microsoft/microsoft-blocked-billions-of-brute-force-and-phishing-attacks-last-year/
GIST	Office 365 and Azure Active Directory (Azure AD) customers were the targets of billions of phishing emails and brute force attacks successfully blocked last year by Microsoft.

"From January 2021 through December 2021, we've blocked more than 25.6 billion Azure AD brute force authentication attacks and intercepted 35.7 billion phishing emails with Microsoft Defender for Office 365," said Vasu Jakkal, Microsoft's Corporate Vice President for Security, Compliance, and Identity.

Multi-factor authentication (MFA) and passwordless authentication would make it a lot harder for threat actors to brute force their way into their targets' Microsoft accounts, Jakkal added.

However, even though attackers have been steadily increasing their breach attempts throughout the last two years, Microsoft is yet to see the vast majority of its customer base interested in adopting strong identity authentication, including passwordless auth and MFA.

"For example, our research shows that across industries, only 22 percent of customers using Microsoft Azure Active Directory (Azure AD), Microsoft's Cloud Identity Solution, have implemented strong identity authentication protection as of December 2021," Jakkal [said](#).

"MFA and passwordless solutions can go a long way in preventing a variety of threats and we're committed to educating customers on solutions such as these to better protect themselves."

Just last week, Microsoft [warned of an active multi-stage phishing campaign leveraging Azure AD](#) to register rogue devices onto targets' networks to distribute phishing emails. As Redmond explained, the attack was blocked on networks where an MFA policy was enabled in Azure AD.

Why multi-factor authentication matters

Enabling [multi-factor authentication \(MFA\)](#) whenever possible makes it a lot harder or even impossible for attackers to pull off a successful attack and take control of your accounts.

To put things into perspective, Microsoft Director of Identity Security Alex Weinert [said](#) that "your password doesn't matter, but MFA does! Based on our studies, your account is more than 99.9% less likely to be compromised if you use MFA."

A [joint study](#) by Google, New York University, and University of California San Diego also discovered that MFA can block up to 100% of automated bots, 99% of bulk phishing attacks, and approximately 66% of targeted attacks.

In August, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) [also advised switching to MFA](#) when adding single-factor authentication (SFA) to its list of cybersecurity bad practices.

As CISA explained, threat actors can easily gain access to systems and accounts not protected with MFA since passwords can be easily stolen or guessed using various techniques, including phishing, keylogging, network sniffing, social engineering, malware, brute-force attacks, and credential dumping.

Microsoft and Google provide simple-to-follow guides on how to secure your accounts, with Microsoft offering a support page on the [five steps to secure your identity](#) and Google a blog post on the [five things to do to stay safe online](#).

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HEADLINE	02/03 DOJ indicts India-based call centers
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/risk/several-india-based-call-centers-indicted-by-us-doj
GIST	<p>A group of India-based call centers and their directors have been indicted for their alleged role in placing scam calls aimed at defrauding US-based citizens – including impersonating banks, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), and Social Security Administration.</p> <p>The superseding indictment charges Manu Chawla and Achivers A Spirit of BPO Solutions Private Limited; Sushil Sachdeva, Nitin Kumar Wadwani, Swarndeeep Singh, a.k.a. Sawaran Deep Kohli, and</p>

	<p>Fintalk Global; Dinesh Manohar Sachdev and Global Enterprises; Gaje Singh Rathore and Shivaay Communication Private Limited; Sanket Modi and SM Technomine Private Limited; and Rajiv Solanki and Technomind Info Solutions of conspiring with VoIP service provider E Sampark and its director, Guarav Gupta, who was previously indicted for sending tens of millions of these scam calls to US victims.</p> <p>"Scam robocalls cause emotional and financial devastation to victims, particularly our vulnerable and elderly populations," said US Attorney Kurt Erskine in a statement. "These India-based call centers allegedly scared their victims and stole their money, including some victims' entire life savings."</p> <p>In the loan scams, victims were duped by call-center representatives into paying fees for phony loans; the reps were sometimes able to convince the victims to transfer funds and gift cards to them in more elaborate financial fraud ploys.</p>
Return to Top	<i>The US Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia is handling the case.</i>

HEADLINE	02/03 Intuit warns of ongoing phishing campaign
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/intuit-warns-of-phishing-emails-threatening-to-delete-accounts/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Accounting and tax software provider Intuit has notified customers of an ongoing phishing campaign impersonating the company and trying to lure victims with fake warnings that their accounts have been suspended.</p> <p>Intuit's alert follows reports received from customers who were emailed and told that their Intuit accounts were disabled following a recent server security upgrade.</p> <p>"We have temporarily disabled your account due to inactivity. It is compulsory that you restore your access within next 24 hours," the attackers say in the phishing messages, masquerading as the Intuit Maintenance Team.</p> <p>"This is a result of recent security upgrade on our server and database, to fight against vulnerability and account theft as we begin the new tax season."</p> <p>The recipients are instructed to go to https://proconnect.intuit.com/Pro/Update immediately to restore access to their accounts.</p> <p>Clicking the link will likely redirect them to an attacker-controlled phishing site designed to infect them with malware or harvest their financial or personal information.</p> <p>Those who might think twice before clicking the embedded link are warned that they might permanently lose access to their accounts.</p> <p>The financial software maker said that it's not behind these emails and that the sender "is not associated with Intuit, is not an authorized agent of Intuit, nor is their use of Intuit's brands authorized by Intuit."</p> <p>How to avoid getting phished</p> <p>The maker of TurboTax and QuickBooks urges all customers who have received one of these phishing emails not to click any embedded links or open attachments.</p> <p>The recommended way to tackle these phishing attempts is to delete the emails to avoid getting infected with malware or being redirected to a phishing landing page that would try to hand over your credentials. Customers who already opened attachments or clicked the links in such phishing emails should:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Delete any downloaded files immediately.</i> 2. <i>Scan their systems using an up-to-date anti-malware solution.</i> 3. <i>Change their passwords.</i>

	<p>Intuit also shares info on how its customers can protect themselves from phishing attacks on its support website.</p> <p>In October, the company also warned QuickBooks customers of phishing attacks using fake renewal charges as lures.</p> <p>The same month, QuickBooks users were targeted by scammers via sites threatening them to upgrade to avoid having their databases corrupted or company backup files removed automatically with the end goal of taking over their accounts.</p> <p>TurboTax customers were also affected by at least four account takeover attack campaigns in 2014/2015, 2019, and 2021.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 CISA: flaws in Airspan Networks Mimosa
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/cisa-warns-of-critical-vulnerabilities.html?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) on Thursday published an Industrial Controls Systems Advisory (ICSA) warning of multiple vulnerabilities in the Airspan Networks Mimosa equipment that could be abused to gain remote code execution, create a denial-of-service (DoS) condition, and obtain sensitive information.</p> <p>"Successful exploitation of these vulnerabilities could allow an attacker to gain user data (including organization details) and other sensitive data, compromise Mimosa's AWS (Amazon Web Services) cloud EC2 instance and S3 Buckets, and execute unauthorized remote code on all cloud-connected Mimosa devices," CISA said in the alert.</p> <p>The seven flaws, which were discovered and reported to CISA by industrial cybersecurity company Claroty, affect the following products —</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mimosa Management Platform (MMP) running versions prior to v1.0.3 • Point-to-Point (PTP) C5c and C5x running versions prior to v2.8.6.1, and • Point-to-Multipoint (PTMP) A5x and C-series (C5c, C5x, and C6x) running versions prior to v2.5.4.1 <p>Airspan Network's Mimosa product line provides hybrid fiber-wireless (HFW) network solutions to service providers, industrial, and government operators for both short and long-range broadband deployments.</p> <p>The critical bugs are part of seven total vulnerabilities, three of which are rated 10 out of 10 on the CVSS vulnerability-severity scale, effectively enabling an adversary to execute arbitrary code, access secret keys, and even modify configurations.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 European oil terminals hit by cyberattack
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/european-oil-port-terminals-hit-cyberattack?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Major oil terminals in some of Western Europe's biggest ports have fallen victim to a cyberattack at a time when energy prices are already soaring, sources confirmed on Thursday.</p> <p>Belgian prosecutors have launched an investigation into the hacking of oil facilities in the country's maritime entryways, including Antwerp, Europe's second biggest port after Rotterdam.</p> <p>In Germany, prosecutors said they were investigating a cyberattack targeting oil facilities in what was described as a possible ransomware strike, in which hackers demand money to reopen hijacked networks.</p> <p>Oil prices hit a seven-year high last month amid diplomatic tensions with gas supplier Russia, and energy bills are fuelling a rise in inflation that has spooked European policymakers.</p>

According to a specialised broker, the alleged hacking is affecting several European ports and is disrupting the unloading of barges in this already strained market.

"There was a cyberattack at various terminals, quite some terminals are disrupted," said Jelle Vreeman, senior broker at Riverlake in Rotterdam.

"Their software is being hijacked and they can't process barges. Basically, the operational system is down," he said.

The EU's Europol police agency said it was aware of the incidents in Germany and had offered support to authorities.

"At this stage the investigation is ongoing and in a sensitive stage," Europol spokeswoman Claire Georges said.

One of the main victims seems to be the cross-border Dutch and Belgian Amsterdam-Rotterdam-Antwerp oil trading hub, where company IT systems were affected by the attack.

SEA-Tank Terminal, which has storage facilities in Antwerp, was hit, Belgian daily De Morgen reported. The Dutch National Cyber Security Centre said the attacks were "probably committed with a criminal motive" and pledged to take further action "if necessary".

- 'Not grave' -

In Germany, two oil supply companies said they were victim to the cyberattack since Saturday January 29.

Both Oiltanking Deutschland GmbH and Mabanaft declared force majeure, an emergency legal clause that is used when a company cannot fulfil its supply contracts because of an unforeseeable event, a joint statement said.

"We are committed to resolving the issue and minimising the impact as quickly and effectively as possible," they said.

The head of Germany's IT security agency, Arne Schoenbohm, said at a conference on Tuesday that the incident was serious but "not grave", German media reports said.

According to the German newspaper Handelsblatt, an initial report from German security services identifies the BlackCat ransomware as the tool used in the cyberattack in Germany.

BlackCat emerged in mid-November 2021 as a software tool to allow hackers to seize control of target systems and has quickly gained notoriety for its sophistication and innovation.

According to US cybersecurity firm PaloAlto, BlackCat has the added advantage of being more lucrative than its rivals for the hackers who use it -- other ransomware platforms usually take a higher commission.

The experts also note that BlackCat's programmers use the Russian language, but this clue could be misleading since hackers often leave false clues to cover their tracks.

Recent ransomware attacks against targets in the United States and other western countries have been blamed on Russian-speaking hacker groups or those operating from Russian territory.

In June, US authorities said they had recovered a ransom payment paid by Colonial Pipeline to Russia-based ransomware extortionists Darkside, who had forced the shutdown of a major fuel network.

The attack caused short-term fuel shortages and drew attention to the broader threat that ransomware posed to essential infrastructure and services.

HEADLINE	02/03 Morley business services discloses breach
SOURCE	https://www.safetymagazine.com/news/business-services-provider-morley-discloses-ransomware-attack/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>Business services provider Morley Companies Inc. disclosed a data breach after falling victim to a ransomware attack on Aug. 1, 2021, according to a security incident notification by the company on Wednesday.</p> <p>The data breach allowed hackers to steal data before the company was able to encrypt the files, which impacted more than 500,000 individuals, including Morley's employees, contractors, and clients.</p> <p>Morley is a US company that offers business services to Fortune 500 and Global 100 firms, including meeting management, back-office processing, contact centers, the creation of trade show exhibits, and more.</p> <p>In notifications released on Tuesday and Wednesday, Morley Companies stated that it suffered a ransomware attack this past summer, which prevented the company from accessing its data.</p> <p>"As a result, Morley learned that additional data may have been obtained from its digital environment," explained Morley in the security incident notification. "Morley thereafter began collecting contact information needed to provide notice to potentially affected individuals, which was completed in early 2022."</p> <p>According to the announcement, the threat actors also may have stolen clients' full name, social security number, date of birth, client ID number, medical diagnostic and treatment information, and health insurance information.</p> <p>While the firm's investigation hasn't found any malicious use of the stolen information, Morley said that it will cover the cost of 24 months of identity theft protection services through IDX for all impacted individuals.</p> <p>Morley Investigation Morley said that they contracted a cybersecurity specialist to help them understand why they could no longer access their files.</p> <p>Upon learning about the ransomware attack, they collaborated with cybersecurity experts to analyze the evidence and determine all impacted parties.</p> <p>"Special programming was required and unique processes had to be built in order to begin analyzing the data. The data complexity also required special processes to search for and identify key information," explains a notification that was filed with Maine's Office of the Attorney General.</p> <p>"This process was lengthy but necessary to ensure appropriate notification occurred. On January 18, 2022, it was confirmed that your information was involved. Importantly, Morley Companies is not aware of any misuse of your personal information due to this incident."</p> <p>However, the cyber-intelligence platform HackNotice claims to have seen Morley's sensitive data on the dark web last week.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Ransomware: like and subscribe or else
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/epx5ne/ransomware-wants-you-to-like-and-subscribe-or-else

GIST	<p>Ransomware has become an endemic problem on the internet. There's no day that goes by without headlines about a new attack where hackers are asking for hundreds of thousands of dollars, or even millions, after locking victims out of their computers and servers.</p> <p>But a new type of ransomware is asking for something a bit different: subscriptions to a YouTube channel.</p> <p>The ransomware was first spotted by MalwareHunterTeam, a group of independent cybersecurity researchers.</p> <p>"HELLO ALL YOUR FILES HAVE BEEN LOCKED BY RANOMWARE [sic] BUT CALSE [SIC] YOU CAN ACCESS BAK WITH SUBSCRIBE MY CHANEL [sic] YOUTUBE," read the message, which shows up on victims' screens.</p> <p>Allan Liska, a cybersecurity researcher at Recorded Future who specializes in tracking ransomware, told Motherboard in an online chat that the malware is real. He said he hasn't analyzed it but has seen an independent analysis from another researcher in a private industry forum. Liska said that the ransomware "is a single machine ransomware, so it only hits one computer and doesn't spread."</p> <p>For now, the hackers don't seem to have been very successful. The YouTube channel they ask victims to subscribe to has only 64 subscriptions at the time of writing. The channel features mostly hacking related videos featuring logos of little known hacking groups, and a couple of videos taken in what appears to be a school.</p> <p>In the message, the hackers call themselves the GHOST CYBER TEAM and claim to be from Indonesia.</p> <p>It's unclear if this ransomware is just a prank, or the work of some teenage hacker looking for attention. For what is worth, the ransomware sample found by MalwareHunterTeam is detected as malicious by several antivirus engines, according to VirusTotal, a malware repository.</p> <p>This wouldn't be the first time someone made ransomware that doesn't ask for cryptocurrency. In 2017, someone made a ransomware that asked for nudes</p> <p>"Your computer has been locked," the message displayed to victims read. "After we reply, you must send at least 10 nude pictures of you. After that we will have to verify that the nudes belong to you."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 'Calling to help' then they stole thousands
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/phone-scam-phishing-finance-apps/
GIST	<p>ONE DECEMBER MORNING, my mother's phone rang. She tugged the iPhone from the holster she kept clipped to the waist of her blue jeans and wondered who might be calling. Perhaps someone from church was checking in on her recovery from the coronavirus. "Hello?" she said.</p> <p>The voice that greeted her was masculine. The caller sounded concerned, and he told her something was wrong with her Amazon account. "Someone has access to your bank accounts through Amazon, and they can take all your money. I'm calling to help." Her mind raced. <i>Oh Lord</i>, she prayed silently, <i>Oh Lord, give me strength</i>. The voice was warm and reassuring, and my mom tried to focus closely on his words. My dad was driving to work in his truck, and she was home alone. She had been cooped up in the house for weeks with Covid, isolated from her community, and she missed the balm of a friendly voice.</p> <p>She tried to steady herself. The man said he needed information to make sure the money was safe. He transferred her to a different male voice—again soothing, reassuring, calm. She promised not to hang up. A brain injury decades earlier made it hard for her to follow his instructions, but she stuck with it. The voice explained slowly, carefully, how to swipe and tap her phone until she had installed an app that allowed him to see what was happening on her screen. Now he followed her every move.</p>

After some hours, she mentioned she had to relieve herself. “It’s OK, I’ll stay on the line,” he said. She parked the phone outside the bathroom and picked it back up when she was done. As noon approached, she told him, “I have to eat.” “I’ll wait, it’s OK. Don’t hang up, we’ll lose all our progress.” She set the phone down on the counter to make a sandwich, then pulled some chips from a cabinet and padded over to the kitchen table.

The phone buzzed with a text—it was my father, checking in. She typed back that there was a problem, but she was fixing it, she had it all taken care of. She tapped the tiny white arrow next to the message field to send her reply, and then she heard the voice, its volume elevated. It sounded angry. She frowned and brought the phone back up to her ear. “Why would you do that? You can’t tell anyone! What if he’s in on it?” She felt confused. That didn’t make any sense. But she also didn’t fully trust herself. She was worn out from her slow recovery, and the steroids she was taking as treatment gave her a hollow buzz of energy.

A 20-minute drive away, my dad sat at his bare desk under a harsh LED light in the office of an automotive manufacturing plant. Reading her message, he felt a prickle of anxiety. But he, too, was on the mend from Covid, and his mind felt foggy. He had recently started a new job as a manager at the factory, and he was still figuring out his colleagues and their processes. He got another message, this one from a coworker, and he forgot about his wife’s text. He adjusted his mask and switched to composing an email he had been meaning to send.

At home, my mother dug out her worn, printed-out packet of passwords from a pile of books and old church bulletins on a side table and flipped through its curling pages. She returned to her chair in the kitchen and followed along as the man told her where to enter them. She tapped to install Cash App and opened up PayPal. She downloaded Coinbase. She set up Zelle so she could easily send money directly from her bank account. She didn’t recognize all the names, but she wrote down her new passwords in the margins of her document. As the afternoon wore on, she began wishing for a nap. “We’re almost done,” the man assured her. “He’s going to be home soon, my husband will be home soon,” she said.

She just wanted to be finished and then to never think about it again. The technology made her feel like she was fumbling in the dark, and she was reluctant to ask more questions. Outside, the sun had dipped well below the wooden fence surrounding the backyard, and the house had fallen into a gloom when the man finally ended the call. The phone felt warm in her hand as she shoved it back into its holster.

That night, when my father got home, he noticed right away that something was off. My mother was jittery and fussing with gadgets on the kitchen counters. Food sat out on the stove, and he was hungry, but he suddenly remembered the text from earlier. “What happened today?” he asked. She shook her head. “You don’t need to do anything, I got it all taken care of,” she said.

“Got what taken care of?”

“I’m not supposed to tell you.”

My mother thought she had labored for hours doing what was necessary to protect herself and her family. Instead, the scammer had [siphoned away](#) all of her personal information—her social security number, date of birth, driver’s license number—and about \$11,000. The new financial apps she’d installed [were all portals](#) through which more of my parents’ money could flow into strangers’ hands.

In the next months, my father and I tried the best we could to undo the damage. It was a frustrating journey. [Getting scammed](#) was dehumanizing on its own, but so were the hours spent begging customer service people for help. I pleaded. I raged. I started to wish the app companies could take a page from our scammer. Because where he had come across as friendly and reassuring, I got chilly half-replies, or just as often, silence. By the end, all I wanted was for someone to show some empathy—to say, perhaps, “I’m calling to help. It’s OK. We’re almost done. I’ll stay with you till we’re done.”

MY PARENTS WERE college sweethearts who met outside the mechanical engineering building at Mississippi State University in Starkville. At the time, my mother was recovering from a traumatic car

crash that left her with frequent partial seizures, which made it harder for her to study. But she managed to become one of the rare women to graduate with a civil engineering degree, and as she likes to tell me now, the only one in her surveying class who didn't chew tobacco. A year later, my dad graduated and joined the Navy as a mechanical engineer, and they got married.

After that, my mom's seizures began to worsen. When they moved to a base in Tennessee, the state denied her a driver's license, and she was devastated. She visited doctors and underwent extensive testing. The physicians gave her two choices. She could take a medication to help control the seizures, but she would still be unable to drive. Or she could undergo a risky surgery to remove the scar tissue on her brain and, with luck, end the seizures. Once my little sister and I were born, she realized she desperately needed to be able to drive. She got the surgery.

Her recovery was tough. She ping-ponged between unspeakable fury and unstoppable tears. Her short-term memory was unreliable, and she had a hard time with text. At bedtime she liked to read me stories from *Alice in Bibleland*, but she often stumbled on the words and glared at them in frustration. When she got stuck on a page, I would pick up where she left off and tell the tale from memory, hoping to soothe her.

After about a year, she recovered, and her life went back to normal. But as more time passed, I again noticed her struggling with basic tasks. She became overwhelmed fixing meals that once were routine and got angry when she forgot where she had placed her keys. Ever since then, I have felt a responsibility to protect my mother from what my dad calls "two-legged monsters"—people who can sniff out weakness and prey on her friendly, open nature.

The evening of the phone call, my father again asked my mother about her text message, and the story spilled out. His stomach in knots, he swept past the food on the stove to the living room to grab his iPad. He sank into his creaky recliner and pulled up their USAA bank accounts. He could see the withdrawals: \$10,000 to Coinbase, \$999 to Zelle, \$70 to Cash App. For some reason—perhaps to cause confusion—\$2,000 had been moved from their savings account to a credit union they used. He felt queasy.

He phoned USAA and spent the next hours on the line with the bank. My mother, agitated, perched on the armrest beside him, trying to recall her conversations with the scammers. "I can't remember. I don't know what to do," she said repeatedly, straightening to walk a few paces and then collapsing into her own recliner a few feet away. Then she'd spring to her feet again and peer over his shoulder. The USAA representative helped them to deactivate Zelle but did nothing about the \$999 transferred through it.

When the call ended, my parents huddled around her phone and thumbed through the unfamiliar payment apps. They eventually zeroed in on changing their passwords. They turned to the password packet, but neither she nor my dad could decipher her notes. "This was so stupid. I can't believe I did this, so stupid," she said, again and again. When my dad finally sat down to eat, he lifted his fork to his mouth without tasting much. That night, they barely slept.

The next day, during his lunch break, my father did what many parents with tech problems do. He called one of his children—me. I was on a work trip that kept me frantically busy, and I had just given in to the urge to take a short nap. I had barely closed my eyes when the phone rang. "Hello!" he said, his voice uncannily chipper. "Hi," I answered cautiously. "What's wrong?"

"I just need to talk this through and figure out how to handle this," my dad said. I kicked the covers off and sat up straight. His voice dropped down a half octave as he abandoned his cheery tone and gave me the basic outline. His lunch break was ending soon, so we agreed to continue the conversation later. Feeling antsy, I poured myself a glass of water and paced around my Airbnb, thinking. Then I sat down at my laptop and started to type.

"Some privacy thoughts," I wrote to my dad. "Now they have y'all's address. Make sure she knows not to open the door for anyone she doesn't know." I ticked off more items: Contact Experian, the credit

monitoring agency; shut down the accounts for the apps she'd installed; contact the IRS in case of identity theft.

That night, after work, my dad called back, and together we set up fraud alerts through Experian. My father texted me the password to my mom's PayPal account, and I managed to shut it down. He got back on the line with USAA, and that night—fortunately—learned he could recoup nearly \$10,000.

The relief was hollow. We still felt exposed. I hadn't closed all the accounts yet, and we weren't sure if the scammers could still see everything my mother typed into her phone. She still spends her days home alone. They could easily call back. My father, utterly worn out, said he couldn't do any more that night. We hung up.

The next day, around noon, I finally called my mother to ask for her version of the events. Her reply was simple, and the pain behind her words was clear. "I did a stupid thing," she said. "I'm so stupid."

Her words rang in my head. Right then my mom needed a daughter, not a technical assistant. My mind jumped to skipping my flight home to California, renting a car, and rerouting to West Tennessee to reassure her in person. But I was due back at work, and I headed to the airport instead.

That day has become a clear demarcation in time for me. Sure, we got most of the money back. But I no longer trust that my parents are safe. That's why, in the following year, I moved back to the South to be closer to home.

FOR WEEKS AND months after the phone call, I sank into deeper and deeper rungs of customer service hell. The worst experience was trying to close my mom's Cash App account. For a while, my correspondent at Cash App kept addressing me in emails as "Jenith," which is neither my name nor my mother's. No matter what I did, I couldn't seem to get clear guidance. I emailed, I called, I was transferred to several agents, all of whom had different thoughts on the matter. One suggested I send documentation declaring my mother dead. Another advised gaining legal guardianship over her.

Cash App, for the record, is owned by Block, formerly Square, which is worth roughly \$55 billion and is clearly not short on resources. I understand why they were reluctant to help—I was not, after all, my mother—but I grew increasingly frustrated at what seemed a superhuman lack of empathy.

Finally I tagged the company in an exasperated tweet. Such measures have always seemed tacky to me, like throwing a tantrum in public. But it worked—the company told me to send a DM with more details. That day I messaged back and forth with "Cash App Support," and I rehashed all the things I'd already tried or been told. I was fully caffeinated and at the end of my rope, which meant my messages had some ... personality. "I know this is not your fault," I typed, "but it is really frustrating that there is not a better way to resolve this—I cannot be the first person to experience this." Indeed, I was not: Several news outlets reported that in the first year of the pandemic, fraud-related complaints to the FTC against Cash App ballooned 427 percent. (Danika Owsley, a company spokesperson, says Cash App has since improved its fraud-detection capabilities.)

To my surprise, I got an acknowledgment: "We totally hear you and will do everything we can to help out here. If those steps don't work, just let us know, and we'll try other options here." I felt a flicker of optimism—what a curious, enchanting thing, this glint of humanity on the other end.

That conversation guided me to do something I probably should have done months earlier, but didn't think of in the anxiety of it all: download the app and sign in as my mother. The reason I couldn't easily close the account, I came to realize, was that the scammer had left my mother with a negative balance of \$20 and had also bought a small amount in bitcoin, which was still sitting in her account. The Cash App representative suggested I sell the bitcoin to pay off the negative balance and send whatever was left back to my mom's bank, and then I could be free of the company. Sitting at my desk, I tapped the button to sell the bitcoin and used the proceeds to escape the Cash App universe.

“I cannot tell you what a relief this is,” I typed into my DM thread. “AHH! So happy to hear this, Becca!” my Cash App Support friend typed back. “Apologies for the stressful start there, but we’re so glad this has finally been resolved for you.”

Seated in my desk chair, I pushed back from my keyboard, slumped down, and let out a sound that I could not replicate now if I tried—a guttural sigh of long-simmering anxiety leaving my body. “I feel drunk,” I told my husband. “In a good way.” He laughed at me, and our dog wagged her tail. “Congrats, baby,” he said.

Three months. It had taken three months to close an account with a negative balance of \$20.

I’M AFRAID OF the future. My father is downright petrified by it. He has sweaty, terrifying nightmares in which he loses everything he has worked so hard to put away. He reads articles about hackers and digital security, but he doesn’t understand all of it, so he sends the links to me. When he was told to buy shirts for his work uniform through PayPal, he couldn’t bring himself to do it; I bought them for him. My dad, the bravest, smartest man I know, is scared of the internet. “It’s like they took my time and money just because they could,” he said to me. “They’ll never be held accountable, ever.”

(He’s right. Most scammers never get caught. Every now and then, the US Department of Justice issues a press release—“Owner and Operator of India-Based Call Centers Sentenced to Prison for Scamming US Victims out of Millions of Dollars” or “Eight Indicted in Nationwide Grandparent Fraud Scam.” They are the extreme exceptions.)

It’s very likely that my mother’s brain injury made her more vulnerable to predation. Studies have shown that those with mild cognitive impairment may be more susceptible to scams, particularly if they struggle with episodic memory (check) and perception speed (double check). But that doesn’t make her as exemplary as you might think. The aging process is not kind to most brains—shrinking the prefrontal cortex that helps orchestrate thoughts and weakening neural connections. Older adults, who have had more time to accumulate assets, also lose the most money to scammers. In 2020, the year of my mother’s incident, Americans overall lost at least \$3.3 billion to fraud, and my mom was one of at least 2.2 million victims of similar heists. In this respect, my mother is in fact very normal.

But it’s the mental and emotional fallout that worries me now. Recently, I spoke with a private investigator, Carrie Kerskie, who works on [internet fraud](#) cases more extreme than what my family went through, though they often begin with a similar tactic. She tells me she’s seen clients who, like my mother, blame themselves and that the internalized shame can twist into something more sinister—paranoia, broken relationships, even suicide.

“Everyone thinks it’s just money,” she says. “It is huge psychologically, because people think, ‘I can’t believe I was so dumb. How did I fall for this?’” In Kerskie’s experience, victims become obsessed with worrying that the bad guys will show up at their door and try to hurt them. They can’t sleep. They stop eating. “A lot of times, they have to take time off work to try to recover from this, and then they lose their job,” Kerskie says. “It’s a horrible downward spiral.”

I flash back to my mother’s haunting words—“I did a stupid thing. I’m so stupid.” Like so many of us, she assumed a scam is something aimed at the gullible, something to have “fallen for” rather than a crime with a victim and a perpetrator. “She didn’t ‘fall for it,’” Kerskie says firmly. “She was manipulated.”

After I moved back to the South—into an apartment a two-hour drive from my parents’ home—I made a quick trip out to see them. I was helping them sort through the affairs of my recently deceased uncle, precisely the sort of thing I had come back to do. While we were digging through stacks of his papers, my dad mentioned, “You know, another scammer called your mama.” My head snapped up. “She did the right thing, though,” he said. “She hung up on them and called me.”

	<p>I turned to look at my mother, who was at the kitchen table once again, updating the to-do list she uses to shore up her memory. She looked at me and we smiled at each other. These days, our conversations tend to be short. We rely on different languages to express our love.</p> <p>I don't know that she'll hang up the next time a perpetrator dials her number. But as I watched her dig through a pile of her dead brother's papers, I felt it deep in my bones, that the only way forward was together.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 NFT money laundering small, but growing
SOURCE	https://www.theverge.com/2022/2/2/22914056/nft-money-laundering-chainalysis
GIST	<p>Money laundering through the buying and selling of NFTs is a small but growing sector of criminal activity, according to a Chainalysis report released Wednesday.</p> <p>The report found a small but growing portion of activity on NFT marketplaces that could be attributed to money laundering, which quantified this amount by tracking value sent to NFT marketplaces from cryptocurrency addresses known to be associated with scams, theft, malware operators, and accounts under legal sanctions. In total the amount tracked was small — around \$1.4 million in Q4 2021 — but had grown significantly from the beginning of the year.</p> <p>“All of this activity represents a drop in the bucket compared to the \$8.6 billion worth of cryptocurrency-based money laundering we tracked in all of 2021,” the report’s authors write. “Nevertheless, money laundering, and in particular transfers from sanctioned cryptocurrency businesses, represents a large risk to building trust in NFTs, and should be monitored more closely by marketplaces, regulators, and law enforcement.”</p> <p>The same Chainalysis report also points to a growth in wash trading, the practice of NFT owners “selling” an NFT by sending money to themselves from a cryptocurrency wallet that they control, and creating a false impression of value. Wash trading has long been a problem for cryptocurrency exchanges — where it gives a misleading sense of trade volume — but it is now increasingly a problem for NFT marketplaces too.</p> <p>Chainalysis identified thousands of cases of NFTs bought from self-financed addresses, meaning instances where either the wallet address that purchased the NFT had first been sent money by the selling address of the NFT, or a common address had sent funds to both buyer and seller addresses.</p> <p>The most prolific wash seller found by Chainalysis had reportedly made 830 such sales. And 262 users were identified as making self-funded sales more than 25 times; the total profit made by this group was about \$8.9 million.</p> <p>Wash trading also has an impact on the perceived relationship between marketplaces. Last week, NFT marketplace LooksRare surpassed OpenSea by trade volume, but analysts found that over \$8 billion of trades could have been users selling NFTs to themselves.</p> <p>In general, the ease with which cryptocurrency can be sent and received anonymously has led to concerns over money laundering since the creation of Bitcoin. Mixer services (which split transactions into many small fractions and then reassemble them into “clean” cryptocurrency) have emerged as a thorn in the side of law enforcement.</p> <p>In response, agencies have aggressively targeted money laundering in the cryptocurrency space, taking down services like Bitcoin Fog in 2021, Helix in 2020, BestMixer in 2019, and even launching a sting in 2018 that saw federal agencies taking over operations of a money-laundering service to gather evidence.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Ransomware ICS impact often significant
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SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/ransomware-often-hits-industrial-systems-significant-impact-survey
GIST	<p>Ransomware attacks in many cases hit industrial control systems (ICS) or operational technology (OT) environments, and impact is often significant, according to a report published on Thursday by IoT and industrial cybersecurity company Claroty.</p> <p>Claroty's "Global State of Industrial Cybersecurity" report is based on a Pollfish survey of 1,100 IT and OT security professionals in the United States, Europe and the APAC region. More than half of respondents work for enterprises that have an annual revenue exceeding \$1 billion. The survey was conducted in September 2021.</p> <p>Roughly 80% of respondents admitted that their organization had experienced a ransomware attack within the past year, and nearly half said the incident had impacted their ICS/OT environment.</p> <p>Only 15% of respondents said there was no impact or minimal impact on operations, and nearly 50% said there was significant impact. Seven percent said the incident resulted in a full operations shutdown that lasted for more than a week.</p> <p>The cyberattack was disclosed to both authorities and shareholders in most cases, but some companies apparently did not inform anyone.</p> <p>The survey shows that ransomware payments are prevalent, with more than 60% confirming that they had paid a ransom. Twenty percent of respondents said the amount of money paid to the hackers exceeded \$1 million — this includes nearly 7% that paid out more than \$5 million.</p> <p>There has been a lot of debate over the past years on ransomware payments. The U.S. government has taken action against payment facilitators and issued a warning regarding potential legal implications. A recently introduced bill would require organizations to report ransomware payments.</p> <p>Of the individuals who took part in the Claroty survey, 28% believe ransomware payments should be legal and there should be no requirement to inform authorities. More than 41%, on the other hand, believe these types of payments should be legal only as long as regulators or authorities are informed. Approximately 20% believe ransomware payments should be illegal.</p> <p>Nearly two-thirds of respondents said reporting incidents involving IT or OT systems to government regulators should be mandatory.</p> <p>When asked about the hourly cost of downtime on their company's revenue, 8% said it was more than \$5 million and 14% said it was \$1 to \$5 million.</p> <p>As for the workforce, a vast majority of respondents believe IT security professionals in their organization are capable of managing the cybersecurity of OT/ICS environments. However, 40% said they are urgently looking to hire more industrial cybersecurity experts.</p> <p>More than 80% of respondents said their ICS/OT security budget had increased moderately or significantly since the start of the pandemic. Moreover, many admitted that ransomware attacks such as the ones that hit Colonial Pipeline led to cybersecurity becoming a bigger priority and increased investment.</p> <p>Claroty's report also covers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on digital transformation and remote work, cybersecurity responsibilities and decision-making, investments and priorities, and best practices.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 ISIS female leader jailed ahead of trial
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kansas-woman-charged-with-leading-an-all-female-isis-battalion-in-syria-ordered-jailed-ahead-of-trial/
GIST	<p>Washington — The Kansas woman accused of traveling to Syria in support of the Islamic State was ordered detained pending trial on Thursday following her arrest late last month.</p> <p>Allison Fluke-Ekren, described in charging documents as a mother and teacher-turned ISIS battalion leader, was last in the U.S. on or about January 8, 2011, government travel records show, before ultimately emerging in Syria in 2014.</p> <p>Once there, according to one of at least six government witnesses who say they interacted with the defendant, Ekren allegedly presented a plan of attack to a paid U.S. foreign government source.</p> <p>That plan, prosecutors say, was for Ekren and other members of the ISIS community in Syria to "dress like infidels" and attack an American college campus with a backpack full of explosives. The attack was ultimately put on hold, court documents explain.</p> <p>During an interaction with another government witness in Syria as described in court filings, Ekren is accused of presenting an attack whereby she could park a car full of explosives on the first floor of a parking garage and detonate the bomb with a cellphone trigger.</p> <p>"Any attack that did not kill a large number of individuals," the described mother of young children allegedly told the government witness, was a "waste of resources."</p> <p>That attack on the parking garage was also stopped after Ekren's then-husband is said to have objected.</p> <p>Charging documents describe Ekren's multiple husbands and their alleged connections to the Islamic state. Government witnesses said one of her husbands was "the emir...of the snipers for ISIS," another was an ISIS fighter from Bangladesh.</p> <p>By 2016, according to a government witness, Ekren was pregnant, had children, and was married to the Bangladeshi fighter. In 2014, another informant alleged one of the defendant's children, approximately five or six years old at the time, wielded a machine gun.</p> <p>But it wasn't just her own children among whom Ekren allegedly promoted gun use. She was also the leader of an all-female ISIS battalion and taught women how to defend themselves against ISIS enemies, prosecutors allege.</p> <p>She was "appointed leader and organizer of an ISIS military battalion located in Syria, known as the Khatiba Nusaybah, in order to train women on the use of automatic firing AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, and suicide belts," a government filing says.</p> <p>"Fluke-Ekren was 'off the charts' and an '11 or a 12' on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being extremely radicalized," said a government witness as described in court filings.</p> <p>"According to the same witness, over 100 women and young girls received military training from Fluke-Ekren in Syria on behalf of ISIS."</p> <p>Ekren, they wrote, "wanted to die in Syria as a martyr."</p> <p>As for her American family, prosecutors said on Monday that Ekren's mother, father, stepmother, and two adult children all requested that she not make any contact with them from the Virginia jail in which she is being held.</p> <p>In court Thursday, Ekren, wearing a green prison uniform, mask, and head covering, did not object to the government's request for her detention.</p>

	Prosecutors briefly stated that she worked for "an extremely violent and callous terrorist organization" before Judge Ivan Davis agreed to jail the defendant.
	Neither Ekren's defense attorneys nor prosecutors commented on the case following Thursday's hearing.
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HEADLINE	02/03 Dead ISIS leader ex-Iraqi officer 'Destroyer'
SOURCE	https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220203-dead-is-chief-was-iraqi-ex-officer-nicknamed-destroyer
GIST	<p>Paris (AFP) – The head of Islamic State group, whom the US declared dead in a special-forces raid Thursday, was nicknamed the "Destroyer" and presided over massacres of Yazidis before assuming the leadership.</p> <p>Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi, also known as Amir Mohammed Said Abd al-Rahman al-Mawla, took over the jihadist network two years ago after founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi blew himself up in a US special forces raid in October 2019.</p> <p>Considered a low-profile but brutal operator, Qurashi had largely flown under the radar of Iraqi and US intelligence until that point.</p> <p>He took over at a time when IS had been weakened by years of US-led assaults and the loss of its self-proclaimed "caliphate" in Syria and northern Iraq.</p> <p>The US State Department slapped a \$10 million bounty on his head and placed him on its "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" list.</p> <p>Born in the northern Iraq town of Tal Afar and thought to be in his mid-40s, his ascension in the ranks of the extremist group was rare for a non-Arab, born into a Turkmen family.</p> <p>Serving in the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein, the late dictator toppled by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Qurashi joined the ranks of Al-Qaeda after Hussein was captured by US troops in 2003, according to the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) think-tank.</p> <p>In 2004, he was detained by US forces at the infamous Camp Bucca prison in southern Iraq, where Baghdadi and host of future Islamic State figures met.</p> <p>'Brutal policymaker'</p> <p>After both men were freed, Qurashi remained at Baghdadi's side as he took the reins of the Iraqi branch of Al-Qaeda in 2010, then defected to create the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), later the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).</p> <p>In 2014, Qurashi helped Baghdadi take control of the northern city of Mosul, the CEP said.</p> <p>The think-tank said Qurashi "quickly established himself among the insurgency's senior ranks and was nicknamed the 'Professor' and the 'Destroyer'".</p> <p>He was well respected among IS members as a "brutal policymaker" and was responsible for "eliminating those who opposed Baghdadi's leadership", it said.</p> <p>He is probably best known for playing "a major role in the jihadist campaign of liquidation of the Yazidi minority (of Iraq) through massacres, expulsion and sexual slavery," said Jean-Pierre Filiu, a jihadism analyst at the Sciences Po university in Paris.</p> <p>On Thursday, US President Joe Biden said that a global "terrorist threat" had been removed when Qurashi blew himself up after US special forces swooped on his Syrian hideout in an "incredibly challenging" night-time helicopter raid.</p>

Hans-Jakob Schindler, a former UN official and director of CEP, called his death a "a major setback for ISIS" in terms of losing a second leader, but doubted it would be a game changer.

IS is thought to prepare for the killings of its leaders with plans for who will take over.

Global spread

Schindler said Quraishi "was not a very transformational leader" because IS had already started to shift from a group that controlled territory in Iraq and Syria to an international network of jihadist organisations under Baghdadi.

But Filiu argued that Qurashi's assassination could be "harder to overcome" than Baghdadi's.

He was "a genuine operational chief whose elimination risks preventing the resurgence of the jihadist group, at least temporarily."

Damien Ferre, director of the Jihad Analytics consultancy, said that Qurashi's legacy would be the reinforcement of the Afghan branch of IS, which has been increasingly active since the United States agreed in 2020 to withdraw its troops from the country.

Other researchers also see the rise of an IS branch around Lake Chad in west Africa as significant, with the group managing to draw fighters from the ranks of the Nigerian terror group Boko Haram.

"On the operational front during his time, Islamic State regained momentum in 2020 before seeing the quality and the quantity of its attacks fall last year," said Ferre.

On January 20, IS fighters launched their biggest assault since the loss of their caliphate nearly three years ago, attacking the Ghwayran prison in the Kurdish-controlled northeast Syrian city of Hasakeh to free fellow jihadists, sparking battles that left over 370 dead.

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HEADLINE	02/03 US sanctions Indonesia-based organization
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/u-s-designates-indonesia-based-organization-for-support-to-terrorism/
GIST	<p>The United States is designating World Human Care, an Indonesia-based organization that has provided financial support to Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), an Indonesia-based terrorist group. World Human Care provides financial support for MMI activities in Syria under the pretense of providing humanitarian aid. This sanctions action is taken under Executive Order 13224, as amended, which targets terrorists, leaders, and officials of terrorist groups, and those providing support to terrorists or acts of terrorism.</p> <p>MMI, formed in 2000, has conducted attacks in Indonesia. It was designated by the Department of State on June 12, 2017, in connection with acts of terrorism that threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States. MMI has also been linked to the al-Qa'ida-linked Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, another designated terrorist group.</p> <p>The United States is taking this action to expose and disrupt MMI's deceptive efforts to use a humanitarian organization as cover for raising and transferring illicit funds. The vast majority of humanitarian aid providers are legitimate and often heroic organizations providing essential, life-saving humanitarian assistance in Syria and elsewhere. World Human Care's actions are deplorable not only for their support for terrorist organizations but also because they undermine the work and reputation of genuine humanitarian aid providers worldwide.</p> <p>The Department of the Treasury says that While World Human Care has engaged in some legitimate humanitarian activities, the main objective of the organization was to serve as a cover to raise funds for</p>

	<p>MMI sympathizers in Syria. In early 2016, World Human Care transferred money to Syria not only for humanitarian needs but also for weapons and fighters there. In one instance, World Human Care sent funds and equipment to a Southeast Asian foreign terrorist fighter in Syria.</p> <p>Historically, World Human Care conducted several fundraising events near Jakarta, Indonesia, to raise funds that would be transferred to al-Qa'ida-linked elements in Syria. In an advertisement on World Human Care's website soliciting donations for a humanitarian project in Syria, donors were advised to send money to a bank account in the care of an MMI official.</p> <p>As a result of the designation, all property and interests in property of World Human Care, and of any entities that are owned, directly or indirectly, 50 percent or more by it, individually, or with other blocked persons, that are in the United States or in the possession or control of U.S. persons, must be blocked and reported to the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Inside decision to target ISIS leader
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/03/biden-targets-isis-leader/
GIST	<p>By December, as it became clear that the United States had located the leader of the Islamic State, a group of military commanders had arrived in the Situation Room to outline for President Biden how to take down the terrorist target in northwestern Syria. But it also became clear just how complicated it would be, with the possibility of civilian losses, American troop casualties and other grave risks.</p> <p>The man who carries in his breast pocket the precise number of U.S. troops who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan — and who was criticized for decisions in Afghanistan that added 13 more to the tally — and whose late son's military service remains a point of pride, was confronted with one of the weightiest decisions of his presidency.</p> <p>A constant give-and-take among Biden and his military commanders — over whether, when and exactly how to go after the Islamic State leader — unfolded over several weeks. It all culminated Tuesday morning in the Oval Office, senior administration officials said.</p> <p>Biden, meeting with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, authorized his first major counterterrorism operation, a raid not dissimilar to one that he had opposed more than a decade earlier, which resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden. And by Wednesday evening, following a late-afternoon call with French President Emmanuel Macron, he was pulled into the Situation Room to watch a video feed of the mission being carried out.</p> <p>“It was very quiet and very tense,” said a senior administration official, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to disclose sensitive details. Some got up and began pacing in the room. “There was not a lot of talking,” the official said.</p> <p>Biden's final authorization Tuesday was the culmination of months of behind-the-scenes work by U.S. intelligence and military personnel. After operatives last fall located Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, the leader of the Islamic State militant group, Biden was briefed in “really exquisite detail” by a small group of senior advisers on Dec. 20 and presented with several options. The objective was to capture, but they knew a likely outcome was to kill.</p> <p>Biden and his advisers saw an opportunity to deal a major setback to the Islamic State, a militant terrorist group that some officials have worried is in the midst of a resurgence. The United States has carried out several operations in recent years in an attempt to track down and kill its leaders as a way of disrupting the group.</p> <p>U.S. officials hope that Qurayshi's status as a longtime leader within the terrorist group would make his death a particular blow.</p>

“We anticipate that this is going to lead to disruption within ISIS. He’s really one of the few remaining, shall we call them, ‘legacy leaders,’” said a senior administration official. “And so, this is a continued push that has been underway for quite some time to continue to remove the leadership elements of ISIS.”

This operation was unusually complex, U.S. officials said, because months of surveillance revealed numerous children in the area. Families lived on the first floor of the complex, apparently unaware that they shared a building with a leading terrorist. Qurayshi rarely came out of the house, aside from going onto the roof to pray, instead relying on couriers to convey his orders to ISIS fighters.

In December, commanders briefed Biden on exactly how the operation could go, even bringing in a tabletop model of Qurayshi’s compound to emphasize the mission’s complexity.

Biden saw the location as a deliberate choice by Qurayshi, who surrounded himself with women and children to make it harder for the United States to take him down without significant civilian casualties. That led Biden to reshape the mission, directing that it would be carried out by U.S. forces on the ground rather than an airstrike.

“We made a choice to pursue a special forces raid at a much greater risk than our — to our own people,” Biden said Thursday morning. “Rather than targeting him with an airstrike, we made this choice to minimize civilian casualties.”

Adding to the operation’s risky nature was the fact that the area is largely controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a militant group with ties to al-Qaeda. Russian forces also control some of the airspace that U.S. forces needed to travel through (while they didn’t warn the Russians ahead of time, they used a deconfliction channel to avoid any additional problems).

The debates unfolding inside the Situation Room over the past several months were not entirely different from those that occurred in 2011, when President Barack Obama’s top advisers deliberated whether to send a Navy SEAL team into Pakistan to go after bin Laden.

Back then, Biden was among the skeptical voices. At the time, he said more needed to be done to confirm that the al-Qaeda leader was actually in the compound in Pakistan, and he worried about the risk to American troops. He voiced his dissent internally, according to numerous accounts, although he [later claimed](#) that he told Obama privately, “Follow your instincts.” Obama authorized the raid, whose success became one of the landmark events of his presidency.

“Biden’s primary concern was the political consequences of failure,” Robert Gates, Obama’s defense secretary, who was also initially skeptical, later wrote in his book “[Duty](#).”

The consequences of potential failure this time were also significant. Biden’s decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan resulted in turbulence and death. In the midst of a chaotic withdrawal, the military [authorized a drone strike that killed 10 civilians](#), a result that U.S. officials said was a “horrible mistake.”

Another blunder involving the military would compound Biden’s problems. But still, he seemed to approach this raid differently than he did the raid to capture bin Laden.

“In many ways, it’s the difference between being president and being vice president,” said Leon Panetta, who served as CIA director and defense secretary under Obama. “The vice president can give thoughts and views. But in this situation, he’s the president. He’s got to make the final decision.”

Biden realized that the operation would affect history’s judgment of his presidency, Panetta added.

“In the end, I think the president understands that in many ways his legacy as president is determined by these kinds of decisions,” he said. “He could make the wrong call, and it could turn out to be a disaster.

But ultimately he's got to decide. ... If you make the right decision and it works out, you get a hell of a lot of credit for having the courage of making the right decision."

Biden gave the final authorization for the raid Tuesday morning in a meeting in the Oval Office, according to administration officials, and military leaders determined Wednesday that they had the right conditions for the raid. They tend to aim for a night when the moon is dim.

"A lot of factors had to line up to be just right," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Thursday. "This was the best window to execute the mission."

Biden and his top advisers gathered in the Situation Room around 5 p.m. Wednesday to monitor the operation unfold in real time. Biden sat at the head table with no suit jacket around his shoulders and a black mask on his face. Vice President Harris sat to his right.

Others in the room included chief of staff Ron Klain; national security adviser Jake Sullivan; deputy national security adviser Jon Finer; Brett McGurk, the White House coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa; homeland security adviser Liz Sherwood-Randall; and Nancy McEldowney, the vice president's national security adviser.

They watched a video feed of the operation as it unfolded, along with an open line to the Pentagon, where top military officials were watching the same scene.

Special Operations forces, who went through dozens of rehearsals of the raid, were set to be on the ground for about two hours.

Upon arrival, the troops used a bullhorn and shouted out their presence. There was relief in the Situation Room when families from the first floor agreed to leave the site and were led to safety. All told, according to U.S. officials, they were able to evacuate 10 people, eight of them children.

But moments later, there was a massive explosion. Qurayshi, U.S. officials said, had detonated a bomb on the third floor, killing himself and his family. It was something that U.S. officials had thought was possible, particularly since Qurayshi's predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, also detonated a bomb during a raid that killed him in 2019.

The military even had its engineers assess whether such an explosion would bring down the whole building, concluding — correctly — that it would destroy only the top floor.

Biden and his team continued watching as one of the military's helicopters encountered mechanical problems. The operatives eventually destroyed the helicopter.

As the raid unfolded, Biden talked in the room about how long they all had been trying to combat the Islamic State, recounting his time as vice president. He remarked how they had previously pursued Qurayshi, who Biden said had only one leg since the U.S. launched a strike on him near Mosul in 2015.

"He was on our target list from the earliest days of the campaign," one senior administration official said.

Throughout Wednesday night, Biden received updates from Sullivan on other aspects of the mission. Operatives made a positive identification using facial recognition and, later, fingerprints, but it wasn't until final confirmation using DNA came around 7 a.m. Thursday that they were ready to announce it to the world.

That morning, Biden delivered remarks from the White House, hailing the work of the military and telling foes of the United States, "We remain vigilant. We remain prepared. ... We will come after you and find you."

	But Wednesday night, just after the Special Operations team left the ground in Syria and the tense Situation Room began to relax, Biden rose to leave, ending with the same remark he uses to conclude most of his speeches: “God bless our troops.”
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HEADLINE	02/03 ISIS staging a comeback then came the raid
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-was-staging-comeback-when-u-s-killed-leader-qurayshi-11643920809?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>RAQQA, Syria—Islamic State, the terrorist organization that once made Raqqa the capital of its self-proclaimed caliphate, has regrouped in the three years since it lost its territory in Iraq and Syria, launching a comeback in recent weeks that suffered a blow Thursday with the killing of its top leader.</p> <p>Since a U.S.-backed coalition dislodged Islamic State from power in 2019, the jihadist group has transformed into an underground insurgency with the ability to stage deadly attacks. It still has tens of millions of dollars to finance its operations, here in the desert and around the world, U.S. officials say.</p> <p>People in northeast Syria say Islamic State has ramped up extortion and smuggling in recent months, while maintaining a steady drumbeat of gun and bomb attacks on soldiers and civilians. The group’s black flags have appeared in places in northeast Syria, witnesses say.</p> <p>In January, Islamic State killed 11 Iraqi soldiers sleeping in their tents, and in Syria the group carried out its worst attack in the region in nearly three years, a prison break in Hasakah that sparked a weeklong gunbattle that left nearly 500 people dead.</p> <p>As many as 200 U.S. soldiers and American warplanes were involved in putting down the prison break, providing a reminder that 900 U.S. troops are still stationed in Syria, mainly to keep fighting Islamic State. American troops and U.S.-backed local forces were still searching for Islamic State members hiding in houses around the prison this week, with deadly clashes.</p> <p>The killing of Islamic State leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi is likely to open yet another chapter in the history of an extremist group that has demonstrated an ability to remake itself. The group’s recent resurgence took place after the U.S. killed its previous top leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019.</p> <p>“They killed Abu Bakr Baghdadi, the organization expanded,” said Sheikh Huweidi al-Shleish al-Mujhim, a tribal leader in Raqqa who opposes the extremists. “They are everywhere.”</p> <p>Islamic State’s persistence poses an uncomfortable dilemma for the Biden administration, which has sought to pivot away from Middle East wars to better take on China and Russia.</p> <p>U.S. officials have expressed concern in recent months that Islamic State still has between \$25 million to \$50 million—down from hundreds of millions of dollars in 2020, but still enough to finance global operations.</p> <p>Islamic State continues to send money to support its branches around the globe to buy weapons, supplies and stipends for fighters and their families, the U.S. Treasury Department said last year.</p> <p>“While ISIS’s so-called physical caliphate has been—has crumbled, it remains a determined and dangerous enemy,” John Godfrey, the State Department’s acting special envoy to the Coalition to Defeat ISIS, said in December.</p> <p>There is little chance that the group could seize a major city as it seized Raqqa in 2013. The city has sprung back to life since it was recaptured from Islamic State in 2017 in which U.S. warplanes reduced much of the city to rubble.</p>

But residents and security officials remain concerned about Islamic State's persistence as an underground militant group.

Security forces affiliated with the U.S.-backed Kurdish-led administration completed a security sweep of Raqqa on Thursday that resulted in 27 people being detained including Islamic State suspects, security officials in Raqqa said. The operation also seized seven illegal weapons, the officials said.

Young men have been trickling back into Islamic State's fold. Factors driving recruitment include Syria's economic crisis, made worse by U.S. sanctions on President Bashar Al Assad's government; a drought that has undermined farming; and the continuing war in the country.

In the village of Karama on the edge of Raqqa, a laborer named Abu Hussein sat in his friend's carpentry shop on Thursday. He said people there still live in fear of Islamic State.

"We lived under them here before. If they come back, they'll behead us," he said.

The Jan. 20 prison break in Hasakah was the most ambitious attack the group has attempted in years, involving hundreds of fighters and a suicide truck bomb rammed into the compound's wall. Prisoners inside rose up against their prison guards and then poured into the surrounding area, invading houses and searching for members of the security forces with the help of local informants, then executing them, residents said.

Prison breaks were among the tactics Baghdadi called upon Islamic State to use to replenish its ranks after its territorial loss. Thousands of its members are detained in prisons overseen by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led militia that oversees a quasi-independent territory in northeast Syria and runs the detention facilities.

The group's most recent attacks appeared intended to test the group's fighting capabilities after a period of regrouping, said Hasan Abu Hanieh, an Amman, Jordan-based analyst of Islamic movements. He said Islamic State has lost almost 50 top commanders in the past seven to eight years, leaving a new generation that security agencies may not recognize.

"The attacks are becoming more sophisticated, which indicates that we will be witnessing more violent, more complex and broader incidents," Mr. Hanieh said.

In Hasakah, Islamic State continues to fight in the streets, even after losing control of the prison.

The SDF's mop-up operations erupted into violence on Tuesday evening just before sunset, when two suspected Islamic State members wearing suicide vests were shot dead in the street. With journalists nearby, the SDF shot the men as they ran across a road near the prison.

Pickup trucks carrying masked SDF fighters sped past, followed by an armored vehicle with flashing red and blue lights.

The two slain militants, draped in black and brown clothes, their explosive vests on display, lay dead next to the concrete divider of a broad paved road. SDF gunmen shouted for passersby to stand back while they approached the bodies, preparing to defuse the explosives. SDF soldiers said four other militants were hiding in the area.

SDF soldiers wearing balaclavas conducted house-to-house searches this week, hunting for Islamic State members who had managed to hide out in the neighborhood adjacent to the prison. At night, suspected militants have fired at the military checkpoints that ring the neighborhood.

In the neighborhood surrounding the prison, dozens of houses are in ruins after the SDF bulldozed them to kill Islamic State members who barricaded themselves inside.

	<p>Stunned residents picked through rubble and swept up broken glass. On a nearby road, a fire burned from an oil tanker set on fire during the battle. The electricity, cut by the authorities during the fighting to flush out the extremists, has yet to be restored.</p> <p>Jamal Salah Khader, 40 years old, recalled how the militants barricaded themselves in one of his family's houses while he sheltered in another house across the street, around midnight on Jan. 20.</p> <p>"Surrender!" SDF fighters had yelled at the militants inside.</p> <p>They replied: "We'd rather die than be humiliated."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 ISIS shows ability to sow chaotic violence
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/world/the-islamic-state-has-shown-in-that-it-can-still-pull-off-military-operations.html
GIST	<p>BEIRUT, Lebanon — One week after Islamic State fighters attacked a prison in northeastern Syria, where they have held out despite a heavy assault by a Kurdish-led militia backed by the United States, the terrorist organization published its version of what had gone down.</p> <p>In its official magazine, it mocked how many times in its history its foes had declared the Islamic State to be defeated. Its surprise attack on the prison, it crowed, had made its enemies "shout in frustration: 'They have returned again!'"</p> <p>That description was not entirely wrong.</p> <p>The battle for the prison, in the city of Hasaka, killed hundreds of people, drew in U.S. troops and offered a stark reminder that three years after the collapse of the Islamic State's so-called caliphate, the group's ability to sow chaotic violence persists, experts said. On Saturday, about 60 ISIS fighters still controlled part of the prison.</p> <p>In Iraq, ISIS recently killed 10 soldiers and an officer at an army post and beheaded a police officer on camera. In Syria, it has assassinated scores of local leaders, and it extorts businesses to finance its operations. In Afghanistan, the withdrawal of American forces in August has left it to battle the Taliban, with often disastrous consequences for the civilians caught in the middle.</p> <p>The Islamic State, which once controlled territory the size of Britain that spanned the Syria-Iraq border, is not as powerful as it once was, but experts say it could be biding its time until conditions in the unstable countries where it thrives provide it with new chances to expand.</p> <p>"There is no U.S. endgame in either Syria or Iraq, and the prison is just one example of this failure to work toward a long-term solution," said Craig Whiteside, an associate professor at the U.S. Naval War College who studies the group. "It really is just a matter of time for ISIS before another opportunity presents itself. All they have to do is to hang on until then."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Raid targeting ISIS leader months to plan
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/us/politics/isis-leader-killed-syria.html
GIST	<p>A risky predawn raid by U.S. Special Operations forces that resulted in the death of the Islamic State's leader on Thursday was set in motion months ago with a tip that the top terrorist was hiding out on the top floor of a house in northwest Syria.</p> <p>In brief remarks at the White House, President Biden said the decision to send about two dozen helicopter-borne commandos to capture or kill the leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, was made to minimize the risk of civilian harm. Military officials said attacking with a bomb or a missile would have</p>

been safer for the troops but could have endangered more than a dozen civilians in the house, including several children.

“We made a choice to pursue a Special Forces raid, at a much greater risk than our — to our own people, rather than targeting him with an airstrike,” Mr. Biden said. “We made this choice to minimize civilian casualties.”

Aides said Mr. Biden had approved the raid on Tuesday morning after months of military planning, including dozens of rehearsals and an exercise involving a tabletop model of the building. On Thursday, he called the operation a warning to all terrorist groups. “This operation is testament to America’s reach and capability to take out terrorist threats no matter where they try to hide anywhere in the world,” he said.

In the end, Mr. Biden said, Mr. al-Qurayshi died when the terrorist exploded a bomb that killed him as well as members of his own family. Rescue workers said women and children were among at least 13 people killed during the assault.

Pentagon officials said that 10 civilians, including eight children, had been safely evacuated, and that commanders would review whether the mission had harmed civilians.

The two-hour raid in the town of Atmeh came days after the end of the largest U.S. combat involvement with the Islamic State since the end of the jihadists’ so-called caliphate three years ago. American forces backed a Kurdish-led militia in northeastern Syria as it fought for more than a week to oust Islamic State fighters from a prison they had occupied in the city of Hasaka.

The battle for the prison killed hundreds of people and offered a stark reminder that even after the collapse of the caliphate, the group’s ability to sow chaotic violence persists, counterterrorism specialists said.

The American assault in Atmeh, carried out by about two dozen Army Delta Force commandos backed by Apache helicopter gunships, armed Reaper drones and attack jets, resembled the raid in October 2019 in which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the previous leader of the Islamic State, died when he detonated a suicide vest as U.S. forces raided a hide-out not far from where Thursday’s operation took place.

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, tacitly acknowledging a recent spate of reports of U.S. airstrikes killing civilians, said the Pentagon would review whether the raid had caused any civilian casualties. Last week, Mr. Austin ordered the military to strengthen its efforts to prevent civilian deaths and to improve the way it investigates and acknowledges claims of civilian harm in U.S. combat operations.

For Mr. Biden, the success of the operation was a welcome relief from the looming threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. It was important for another reason: After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan last year, there was widespread concern that the U.S. evacuation would give ISIS a new opportunity to retake territory. The director of the C.I.A., William J. Burns, told Congress that efforts to collect intelligence about local ISIS operations could suffer.

Speaking in the Roosevelt Room at the White House, Mr. Biden was understated as he described the history of the ISIS leader, saying that he had ordered a series of atrocities, including against the Yazidi people.

Little is known about the ISIS leader, whose real name is Amir Muhammad Said Abdel-Rahman al-Mawla, or other members of the group’s senior command. But his death was a significant blow to the terrorist group, analysts said.

While he was nowhere near as prominent as his predecessor, “Mr. Qurayshi still commands a lot of respect within jihadi circles and is known to be highly intelligent and able to think strategically,” said Colin P. Clarke, a counterterrorism analyst at the Soufan Group, a security consulting firm based in New York.

Indeed, after Mr. al-Qurayshi replaced Mr. al-Baghdadi, the United States put a bounty of up to \$10 million on his head.

Mr. Clarke said that Mr. al-Qurayshi, who was 45 and born in Iraq, had kept a low profile, which helped him elude an American-led manhunt but also may have hampered his ability to expand the Islamic State's global network and brand. In March 2019, ISIS lost the last piece of its territory, which once stretched across parts of Syria and Iraq.

According to two senior administration officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the operation, an unspecified intelligence tip had placed Mr. al-Qurayshi in the Atmeh area of Idlib Province and then, by early December, more specifically at a stand-alone, three-story cinder block building surrounded by olive trees.

Images shared on social media by activists who visited the site showed simple rooms with mats on the floors, a diesel heater and clothes and blankets scattered about, some of them covered with blood.

American officials said Mr. al-Qurayshi and his family lived on the third floor. He left the building only occasionally to bathe on the rooftop. He relied on a top lieutenant who lived on the building's second floor and who, along with a network of couriers, carried out his orders to ISIS branches in Iraq and Syria, and elsewhere in the world without using electronic devices whose signals Western spies could intercept — a practice Osama bin Laden used for years.

Top Pentagon officials and military commanders apprised Mr. Biden of their planning, at one point presenting a model of the building where the ISIS leaders and their families lived — and noting that a Syrian family with no apparent connection to the terrorist group was living on the first floor.

Mindful of the danger to civilians and to the commandos, military engineers told Mr. Biden that they did not believe the entire building would collapse if Mr. al-Qurayshi detonated a suicide vest or larger explosives on the third floor. They proved correct.

Opting for a ground raid allowed the commandos to try to safely evacuate civilians from the building — something not possible in an airstrike, which might flatten the building. In the end, no Americans were hurt.

Shortly after the commandos arrived, warnings shouted in Arabic over bullhorns urged occupants on the first floor — as well as anyone else — to evacuate. One man, one woman and four children fled the first floor.

Not long after that, Mr. al-Qurayshi detonated his explosives — much bigger than a suicide vest — in a blast so powerful that bodies, including his own, were blown out the window.

“He killed himself and his immediate family without fighting, even as we attempted to call for his surrender and offered him a path to survive,” Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the Central Command, who oversaw the mission, said in a virtual security conference sponsored by the Middle East Institute on Thursday.

Following the blast, commandos stormed the building and engaged in a firefight with Mr. al-Qurayshi's top lieutenant and his wife, who were barricaded on the second floor with their children. Both were killed, as was one child, but four children were safely evacuated.

American officials said most of the casualties resulted from the explosion on the third floor and fighting on the second floor.

In complex raids, the military's initial version of events may be incomplete. Accounts of past operations have at times turned out to be contradictory or wrong, and Mr. Kirby warned that the Pentagon was still collecting information from the assault.

Mr. Biden, along with Vice President Harris, Mr. Austin and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, monitored the mission late Wednesday from the White House Situation Room.

At one particularly tense moment in the operation, a U.S. helicopter ferrying commandos to the building experienced a mechanical problem — a drivetrain failure, Mr. Kirby said. It flew to a location well away from the target site, where commanders determined it could not be readily repaired, and was destroyed by rigged explosives and U.S. attack aircraft.

At another moment at the end of the operation, several armed men linked to Al Qaeda approached the house in a menacing manner. In a brief firefight, two militants were killed and several others fled, officials said.

Mr. Kirby said that military forensics experts identified Mr. al-Qurayshi using fingerprint and DNA analysis, and left his remains at the site. Mr. Kirby said the American troops took no prisoners or civilians into custody. But he indicated that the commandos collected materials such as cellphones and computer hard drives — as is customary in this kind of operation — that analysts will pore over for clues on combating ISIS.

Asked about the timing of the raid, Mr. Kirby said multiple factors played a role: intelligence levels, certainty about the ISIS leader's location, weather and operational conditions (it was a virtually moonless night, ideal for night operations).

"A lot of factors had to line up to be just right," said Mr. Kirby. "This was the best window to execute the mission."

Mr. Kirby said the fight against ISIS and other extremist groups will continue. "They're still a threat," he said. "No one's taking a victory lap."

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HEADLINE	02/03 ISIS leader killed in raid kept low profile
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/03/middleeast/isis-leader-dead-abu-ibrahim-al-hashimi-al-qurayshi-intl/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)In the early hours of Thursday morning, the head of ISIS died during a US raid in northwest Syria just as the extremist group was in the midst of a revival.</p> <p>Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi killed himself and his family after igniting a bomb at the beginning of the operation, according to a senior Pentagon official.</p> <p>Qurayshi succeeded ISIS founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019 after his demise. When Qurayshi took over the organization, the vast swathes of territory the group controlled -- an area larger than the size of the United Kingdom at its peak -- had largely vaporized. Observers dubbed him a Caliph without a Caliphate. Yet he sought to reinvigorate the organization.</p> <p>In recent months, he oversaw a resurgence of ISIS in various parts of Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Iraq reported an uptick in violence linked to ISIS. In the Kurdish-controlled northeastern part of Syria, the group staged a lethal days-long attempted jail break in a bid to free ISIS members. Hundreds of inmates, including children, died. Scores of Kurdish fighters also perished in the clashes.</p> <p>In Lebanon, multiple regional and local reports have indicated that the group has been recruiting scores of members from the northern city of Tripoli, one of the areas hardest hit by the country's devastating economic crisis.</p> <p>Throughout it all, Qurayshi -- who was known by several aliases -- kept a low profile, much like his predecessor. The US Rewards for Justice program offered a reward of \$10 million for information about</p>

[him](#). His history in the organization is also murky. But snippets from interviews with ISIS prisoners paint a picture of a man with a dark past as a member of Baghdadi's inner-most circle.

Qurayshi became a "religious scholar" with al Qaeda in Iraq, before the group rebranded itself as the Islamic State. In 2014, he "helped drive and justify the abduction, slaughter, and trafficking of the Yazidi religious minority in northwest Iraq," the Rewards for Justice notice says.

Much of the Yazidi community lived in an area close to what some analysts believe was Qurayshi's home town of Tal Afar in northern Iraq. In 2014, after ISIS had taken Tal Afar and Mosul, the group enslaved thousands of Yazidi women and children and murdered thousands of Yazidi men, in what the United Nations has called a genocide.

Counter-terrorism expert Daniele Raineri has noted that he was "the deputy who managed to spend the years since 2010 almost totally under the radar." But when others in the ISIS hierarchy were taken or died in battle, he became one of the group's leading ideologues.

In a 2018 interview with Saudi-owned al Arabiya, a senior ISIS detainee in Iraq, Ismael al Eithawi called Qurayshi "the most prominent of Baghdadi's surrounding circle."

A 2018 internal ISIS document repeatedly describes Qurayshi as "the deputy" to Baghdadi. He died in an operation similar to that which killed Baghdadi. And it is yet unclear if the operation will stem the group's resurgence or if the cycle of extremist violence will continue undeterred.

ISIS has not acknowledged his death and it's as yet unclear who may replace him. Few if any of Baghdadi's inner circle are thought to be still at large.

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HEADLINE	02/03 ISIS leader sets bomb off: kills self, family
SOURCE	https://www.the-sun.com/news/4603497/isis-leader-the-professor-killed-by-us-special-ops/
GIST	<p>AN ISIS leader has blown up himself and his whole family during a US Special-Ops raid on his Syrian bolthole.</p> <p>Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi detonated a bomb that killed him and member of his family, the White House said.</p> <p>Thirteen are believed to be dead, including six kids and four women, during the assault which involved 24 elite Special-Ops backed by fighter jets and helicopter gunships.</p> <p>"At the beginning of the operation, the terrorist target exploded a bomb that killed him and members of his own family, including women and children," a senior administration official told Reuters</p> <p>President Joe Biden confirmed al-Qurayshi was "removed from the battlefield" during the overnight operation in a tweet on Thursday.</p> <p>In a statement, the President said: "Last night at my direction, U.S. military forces in the northwest Syria successfully undertook a counterterrorism operation to protect the American people and our Allies, and make the world a safer place</p> <p>"Thanks to the skill and bravery of our Armed Forces, we have taken off the battlefield Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi—the leader of ISIS. All Americans have returned safely from the operation.</p> <p>"May God protect our troops."</p> <p>Al-Qurashi became ISIS leader after former head Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a similar raid by US forces in 2019 in the nearby town of Barisha.</p>

Al-Qurashi, also known as Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman al-Mawla and two other aliases, was a senior terrorist leader in ISIS's predecessor organisation, Al Qaeda in Iraq and steadily rose through the ranks to become deputy leader, according to [Rewards for Justice](#).

He spearheaded the abduction, rape, and slaughtering of thousands of Yazidis in northwest Iraq and was on the US State Department's most wanted list since March 2020.

At least 13 people were reportedly killed, including six children and four women, when US special forces swooped in on a home in northwestern Syria on Thursday.

The operation - which residents say lasted over two hours - took place in Atmeh, a village near the border with [Turkey](#) that is home to thousands of [Syrian](#) refugees.

Earlier, Pentagon confirmed US special ops had carried out what it called a "successful" counter-terrorism mission.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said: "U.S. Special Operations forces under the control of U.S. Central Command conducted a counterterrorism mission this evening in northwest Syria. The mission was successful. There were no U.S. casualties."

It comes as haunting images emerge of body parts scattered around al-Qurashi's home in Syria's rebel-held Idlib province.

Jamil el-Deddo, a resident at a nearby refugee camp, told the AP: "The first moments were terrifying, no one knew what was happening.

"We were worried it could be Syrian aircraft, which brought back memories of barrel bombs that used to be dropped on us."

The top floor of the house was almost completely destroyed while blood could also be seen on the walls and floor of the remaining structure and a bedroom with a child's wooden crib on the floor.

On another damaged wall, a blue plastic children's swing was still hanging and a nearby kitchen was blackened with fire damage.

Other residents - who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals - said they heard helicopters, explosions and machine-gun fire.

This was the largest raid in the province since the 2019 [Trump](#)-era U.S. assault that killed the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Idlib is broadly controlled by Turkey-backed fighters, but is also an al-Qaida stronghold and home to several of its top operatives.

Other militants, including extremists from the rival IS group, have also found refuge in the region.

The Syrian Civil Defense and first responders known as the White Helmets confirmed 13 people were killed in shelling and clashes that ensued after U.S. the commando raid. They included six children and four women, it said.

Witnesses described seeing a large ground assault, with U.S. forces using megaphones urging women and children to leave the area.

Omar Saleh, a nearby resident, said the doors and windows of his house started to rattle to the sound of low-flying aircraft at 1:10 a.m. local time.

	<p>He then heard a man, speaking Arabic with an Iraqi or Saudi accent through a loudspeaker, urging women to surrender or leave the area.</p> <p>This went on for 45 minutes. There was no response. Then the machine gun fire erupted, Saleh said. He said the firing continued for two hours, as aircraft circled low over the area.</p> <p>Others reported hearing at least one major explosion during the operation.</p> <p>A U.S. official said that one of the helicopters in the raid suffered a mechanical problem and had to be blown up on the ground.</p> <p>Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said troops for the U.S.-led coalition using helicopters landed in the area and attacked a house. It said the force clashed with fighters on the ground.</p> <p>The military operation got attention on social media, with tweets from the region describing helicopters firing around the building near Atmeh.</p> <p>The U.S. has in the past used drones to kill top al-Qaida operatives in Idlib, which at one point was home to the groups biggest concentration of leaders since the days of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan.</p> <p>The fact that special forces landed on the ground suggest the target was believed to be of high value. A similar attack in Pakistan, in 2011, killed bin Laden.</p> <p>Thursday's clandestine operation came as the Islamic State group was reasserting itself in Syria and Iraq, carrying out some of its biggest attacks since it was defeated in 2019.</p> <p>In recent weeks and months, the group has launched a series of operations in the region, including a 10-day assault late last month to seize a prison in northeastern Syria.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Europol referrals: online bomb manuals
SOURCE	https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/europol-coordinates-action-against-bomb-manuals-available-online
GIST	<p>On 1 February, a large-scale Referral Action Day targeting terrorist content online took place at Europol's headquarters. The European Union Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) at Europol's European Counter Terrorism Centre (ECTC) coordinated the referral activity, which saw the involvement of specialised counter terrorism units from France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.</p> <p>The referral activity targeted online content on explosive chemical precursors which was being shared among terrorist supporting networks, including jihadist, right-wing and left-wing terrorist networks.</p> <p>The action day resulted in 563 pieces of content on 106 websites and platforms being assessed for referral to online service providers for their voluntary consideration against their terms and conditions.</p> <p>The content included manuals and tutorials which gave instructions, among other things, on how to make bombs with the use of precursors and how to prepare and carry out terrorist attacks.</p> <p>This action was part of a series of similar joint actions which have taken place in the past and will continue to be organised frequently.</p>
Return to Top	<i>To know more about the work of the EU IRU, read the dedicated feature story.</i>

HEADLINE	02/04 Young Lebanese turn to militancy
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/economy-collapses-young-lebanese-turn-militancy-82665501

WADI NAHLEH, Lebanon -- Two weeks before he was supposed to get married, Bakr Seif told his mother he was going out to see his fiancée and would be back for lunch. When he did not show up by nighttime, his mother called the fiancée, who said he had not been to visit her.

That day, Dec. 8, was the last time Seif's mother saw him. Last week, he was among nine people killed in an Iraqi army airstrike targeting suspected militants in eastern Iraq. At least four of them were Lebanese, all from this small, impoverished village near the northern city of Tripoli.

As Lebanon slid deeper into economic misery over recent months, dozens of young men have disappeared from the country's marginalized north and later surfaced in Iraq, where they are believed to have joined the Islamic State group. The migration has stoked fears of a new wave of radical recruitment, taking advantage of frustration and despair fueled by the economic meltdown and sectarian tensions.

Many Lebanese have plummeted into poverty as the local currency has collapsed, the value of salaries and bank accounts has evaporated, and prices have soared. Even before the crisis, Tripoli was Lebanon's poorest city — and things have only gotten worse with scores of young, seemingly unemployed men in the streets.

But it's not just poverty driving some young men to join IS. Tripoli and its surrounding areas are also a center for many of Lebanon's Sunni Muslim community, who resent what they say is neglect from the government in Beirut. Security forces have targeted Sunni youth in crackdowns over militancy, and activists have said for years that thousands have been detained without trial because of suspicions of militant links.

Seif's mother believed her son was being detained by the Lebanese intelligence. But five or six days before he was killed, he called, the first she'd heard from him since his disappearance. He wouldn't say where he was, telling her only, "I have been wronged, I have been wronged," without explanation, she said.

Seif had spent seven years in jail on suspicion of "acts of terrorism" and was released in June without trial. The family maintains his innocence and opened a grocery for him to work in, since no one else would employ him after his release.

"He was living in constant fear. He used to tell me, 'I trust no one but my family,'" his mother said.

IS's top leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, was killed in a U.S. raid on his safehouse in northwest Syria on Thursday. Experts believe that while his elimination may cause some short-term disruption, the group can replace him and continue its campaign of violence in Iraq and Syria.

The numbers of Lebanese apparently joining IS is nowhere near the hundreds who went to neighboring Syria to join rebels there, including ones linked to al-Qaida, at the height of that country's civil war. Since that war waned several years ago, the flow of Lebanese to join dried up.

The migration to join IS in Iraq appears to be new. Lawyer Mohammed Sablough, who heads the Center for Prisoners Rights, said it is believed that between 70 to 100 young men disappeared from the Tripoli area in past months, though the exact number is not known.

They were from the poorest districts in and around Tripoli, and some may have been lured by the promise of jobs, not realizing they were joining IS, he said. Others were afraid of being swept up in crackdowns.

"These men are being manipulated by dark forces led by those who benefit from the revival of Daesh and want to harm the image of Tripoli," Sablough said, using the Arabic acronym for IS.

Besides the deaths in Sunday's strike, at least two other Lebanese have been killed in Iraq since December.

Tripoli has been the scene of militant violence in the past — the most serious in 2014, when militants inspired by the Islamic State group carried out attacks against Lebanon’s army.

Disappearances of young men began to rise in late August, not long after a former military intelligence member, Ahmad Murad, was shot and killed in Tripoli.

In the subsequent search, the military said it arrested an IS cell that included six militants involved in Murad’s killing. It appears the capture of the cell led other IS cells in the north to go on the run.

Remnants of IS have been waging a campaign of frequent hit-and-run attacks in Syria and Iraq ever since the group lost its last shred of territory in Syria in March 2019.

They recently launched two of their boldest operations yet.

On Jan. 20, about 200 IS militants attacked a prison in Syria’s northeastern city of Hassakeh and were joined by rioting inmates. It took more than a week for Kurdish-led U.S.-backed fighters to fully regain control over the prison in fighting that killed nearly 500, including several hundred militants, according to Kurdish officials.

On Jan. 21, IS gunmen in Iraq broke into a barracks in a mountainous area in Diyala province, killed a guard and shot dead 11 soldiers as they slept.

On Sunday, Iraq’s military carried out airstrikes on an IS cell it said was behind the barracks attack, killing nine militants, including the Lebanese.

Iraqi officials said four Lebanese were killed. Families and the mayor of Wadi Nahleh, Fadel Seif, said they were five — Bakr Seif, his cousin Omar Seif and three friends, Youssef Shkheidem, Omar Shkheidem and Anas Jazzar. The extended Seif family is the largest in the village.

“There are several factors making the youth flee, and the main one is lack of jobs,” the mayor said.

Omar Seif’s mother said he disappeared on the last day of 2021 and called her days later from a number she didn’t recognize. She informed Lebanese authorities, who told her Omar was in Iraq, using an Azeri telephone number. “I said, he is dead (to me). I did not raise him in order to send him to Iraq or ... Syria or any other place,” she said.

On Sunday, she received a call from another unknown number, telling her her son had been killed.

Omar’s mother said he had long been harassed by Lebanese security officials. He spent years in prison, even while still a juvenile, also on terrorism suspicions, she said. After his release, he was repeatedly detained for short periods, when police would beat him up and give him electrical shocks, she said.

“Prison destroyed us. It burned our children, our reputation and dignity. It burned our money. Even his father died while he was in jail,” she said, speaking in the sitting room of her small, ground floor apartment with peeling walls, as friends and relatives dropped in to offer condolences.

She said Omar could not live a normal life or work because authorities officially revoked his civil rights, meaning he could not vote or get a government job.

“When a young man who is between 15 and 30 cannot get married or buy anything or enter a restaurant to have a meal like all people, of course he will choose death and will be an easy target.”

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HEADLINE	02/03 France tough challenge in Africa: Mali
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/explainer-france-sticky-situation-amid-crisis-mali-82644012

PARIS -- France is facing its toughest challenge in Africa in years: What to do about thousands of French troops stationed in junta-led Mali, the core of a major international anti-terrorism operation in the increasingly restive Sahel region.

Mali's coup leaders ordered France's ambassador to leave the West African country this week, the latest episode in a growing diplomatic crisis between Mali and its African neighbors and European partners.

A military pullout from Mali, where French forces have been active since 2013, would shake up the region.

Here's a look at the challenging relations between France and Mali.

WHAT PROMPTED TENSIONS WITH MALI?

Paris insists that Mali's military rulers have not stuck to their promise to hold new democratic elections by the end of this month as was demanded by the West African regional bloc ECOWAS and other international partners.

Col. Assimi Goita, who grabbed power in an August 2020 coup, already had carried out a second coup by dismissing the civilian leaders in Mali's transitional government and putting himself in charge last year. Tensions escalated further when Goita postponed the next presidential vote until 2026.

ECOWAS responded to the delay by imposing more sanctions on Mali. Then last week, the Malian government ordered Danish soldiers out of the country. The Danes had recently arrived to join a European-led military task force known as Takuba.

"The issue we are facing is not a French-Malian issue," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Tuesday. "It's an issue between the Europeans, the Africans and Mali."

Norway this week reversed a decision to take part in the force, and Germany is discussing what to do about its deployment.

The EU has been considering imposing sanctions on Mali, with support from France, but so far no decision has been made.

WHY HAS MALI'S GOVERNMENT TAKEN ISSUE SPECIFICALLY WITH FRANCE?

Macron drew the ire of Mali's military leader when he said in June last year that ECOWAS had made a "mistake" in allowing Goita to become president after his second coup deposed the civilian transitional leaders — saying it's a bad signal to African neighbors.

Several top officials in Mali's transitional government including Defense Minister Sadio Camara and Prime Minister Choguel Maiga are seen as favoring closer ties with Russia instead of France, the former colonial power.

Tensions were further inflamed when Maiga went on to tell the U.N. General Assembly that France had abandoned Mali.

WHAT'S FRANCE'S NEW STRATEGY IN THE SAHEL REGION?

France has started withdrawing troops from Mali, nine years after it first intervened to drive Islamic extremists from power in northern Mali.

France has shut down its bases in Mali's northern centers of Timbuktu, Kidal and Tessalit in recent months but has maintained its presence in Gao near a volatile border region where operations have been concentrated in recent years.

France's so-called Barkhane force — which is involved in Mali, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania — has decreased from 5,500 troops to 4,800 with a goal to reduce further to about 2,500 troops over the long term.

When making the announcement last year, President Emmanuel Macron said the operation was no longer suitable for the needs of the Sahel region.

France instead wants to focus on supporting specialized regional forces and neutralizing extremist operations by militants linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group.

The fight against terrorism remains France's top priority, but Defense Minister Florence Parly suggested changes could soon affect the country's presence in Mali — even if French troops will remain involved in other countries of the Sahel region.

“We cannot stay in Mali at any price,” she said.

Parly travels Thursday to neighboring Niger to discuss the future of the force.

France's foreign minister said on Tuesday that “the fight against terrorism will continue, and will continue in the Sahel. It will continue with the consent of the region's countries.”

WHAT ABOUT RUSSIA'S WAGNER MERCENARY GROUP?

French diplomacy campaigned last year to prevent the Malian junta from making a deal with Russian mercenary group Wagner — in vain. Paris warned that such a deal would be “incompatible” with its anti-terrorism strategy in the country.

Wagner has been accused of human rights abuses in Central African Republic and involvement in the conflict in Libya.

In December, France and 15 European countries condemned in a joint statement the Malian transitional authorities' decision to allow the deployment of Wagner forces, and accused Moscow of supporting the private military company's use of mercenaries in the West African country.

Le Drian recently said that Wagner mercenaries “are using the country's resources in exchange for protecting the junta. They are plundering Mali.” Wagner is using the weakness of some African states to increase Russia's influence on the continent, Le Drian added in an interview to French newspaper Journal du Dimanche.

The Malian government has acknowledged that Russian soldiers are present in the country to train Malian soldiers.

Last month, the EU slapped sanctions on eight people and three oil companies linked to Wagner.

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HEADLINE	02/02 Man jailed 16yrs; material support to terror
SOURCE	https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdfl/pr/man-who-attempted-provide-material-support-isis-sentenced-16-years-federal-prison?utm_source=iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=3643046
GIST	Miami, Florida – A federal district judge in Miami has sentenced Jonathan Guerra Blanco, a/k/a “Abu Zahra Al-Andalusi,” a Cuban-born naturalized United States citizen, to 16 years’ imprisonment and a lifetime of supervised release for attempting to provide material support to a designated terrorist organization.

In 2019, law enforcement officers learned that Guerra Blanco was following widely distributed instructions from ISIS directing adherents to -- on their own -- publish ISIS propaganda, fundraising requests, recruitment material, justification for attacks on the United States, and all manner of material helpful to ISIS. Guerra Blanco attempted to provide material support to ISIS by translating the group's materials into Spanish for his target audience. In addition, Guerra Blanco produced videos that he intended to use to recruit Spanish speakers to ISIS's cause, as well as to terrorize regular citizens of Spain. Many of the videos that Guerra Blanco produced and distributed from his two ISIS media networks glorified the terrorist group's violence and called for attacks on Spanish authorities.

On December 22, 2020, Guerra Blanco pled guilty to a one-count information charging him with attempting to provide material support or resources to a designated foreign terrorist organization, ISIS, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 2339B. U.S. District Judge Robert N. Scola, Jr. imposed Guerra Blanco's sentence.

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	02/03 Where is Oakley Carlson?
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/community-demanding-answers-from-dcyf-over-missing-grays-harbor-county-girl
GIST	<p>OAKVILLE, Wash. - By now, you probably know her name: Oakley Carlson. The five-year-old Grays Harbor County girl is still missing despite a massive effort to find her.</p> <p>At the center of her disappearance is Oakley's biological parents. They are in jail as of Thursday, held on an unrelated charge as investigators try to solve Oakley's case. For now, they are charged and accused of not giving Oakley's six-year-old sister the medication she needs. Jordan Bowers and Andrew Carlson have pleaded not guilty.</p> <p>On Saturday outside that jail, people in the community shouted Oakley's name.</p> <p><i>Where is Oakley?</i></p> <p>That haunting question is keeping an entire town on edge.</p> <p>The people rallying outside wanted their unified voices to pierce through the walls of the Grays Harbor County jail.</p> <p>Jamie Jo and Erik Hiles, once foster parents of Oakley, were at Saturday's rally. They were directly yelling at Oakley's biological parents.</p> <p>"I don't want Jordan and Andrew for one second to think that we have forgotten about Oakley," said Jamie Jo.</p> <p>Everyone at the rally believes Jordan Bowers and Andrew Carlson know what happened to their daughter, and are not confessing.</p> <p>"The truth will come out sooner or later, there is only so much pressure they can take," Foster uncle Ethan Cooperrider said.</p> <p>The rage is not only directed at the couple, but also at the Department of Children, Youth & Families (DCYF).</p> <p>"Failure of them to hear our concerns," Jamie Jo said.</p> <p>Did the system fail Oakley Carlson?</p>

Dec. 6, 2021 is when the world found out [Oakley had disappeared](#), but her foster parents have been sounding the alarm for more than two years prior.

"I think it's a shame the system is so broken," Cooperrider said.

Jamie Jo wrote to DCYF in Oct. 2019, saying that Oakley saw Jordan hit Andrew. But the courts and DCYF ultimately returned Oakley to her biological parents for good in Nov. 2019.

"I called [Child Protective Services] on January of 2021, what happened with that?" said Jamie Jo.

Jamie Jo says she made that phone call after she saw a picture of Oakley looking sick and gaunt.

Then in Nov. 2021, she raised the red flag again, after hearing about a fire at Oakley's house.

"DCYF is not doing the right thing, not doing their jobs," said Jo.

FOX 13 has repeatedly tried to get answers over the weeks, trying to learn if social workers ever followed up on Jamie Jo's concerns.

Every time we have asked details about Oakley's case, DCYF says that due to privacy laws, they cannot comment on case-specific details.

So as of Thursday, FOX 13 is still waiting for answers through a public disclosure request (PDR) which the agency, by law, has to offer up eventually. FOX 13 is expecting DCYF to release PDR documents by early March 2022.

"I will go to the ends of the earth for this little girl," Jordan Wolfe said.

Wolfe did not know Oakley personally, but the [Elma](#) mother says she is enraged by it all.

"We need to make a change within the system, so this never happens again," Wolfe said.

What's next?

Wolfe is behind a petition to create "[Oakley's Law](#)," calling on lawmakers to require DCYF to do more rigorous monitoring and drug tests, whenever a child is reunited with parents with a history of drug use. Wolfe says she would also like to see a five-point safety net; points of contact that can keep an eye on a child after reunification.

FOX 13 went to state lawmakers about Oakley's Law, but for this session, there is nothing circulating in the legislature.

Representative Tana Senn says every case is different, and sometimes it is hard to legislate DCYF cases. But she says several other bills do address the foster care system and also aim to strengthen resources for struggling parents.

"I hope they are not disappointed, because we talk about Oakley all the time, Children Youth and Families Committee—I know it really has captured the attention and have broken all of our hearts," said Rep. Tana Senn.

It's impossible for your heart not to break when Oakley's siblings are telling investigators now that they were worried about Oakley starving, or that Bowers would beat Oakley with a belt and put her in the closet possibly under a stairwell.

The Grays Harbor County Sheriff's Office says they are working tirelessly on this case. All six of their detectives are looking for Oakley. The Sheriff's Office says they have [obtained new evidence](#) and that could lead to new charges against the couple.

	But, the new evidence presented does not involve Oakley; instead, it's about Oakley's six-year-old sister. Undersheriff Brad Johansson says they cannot disclose exactly what the new evidence is until formal charges come down.
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HEADLINE	02/03 Mount Everest highest glacier losing ice
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mount-everest-melting-glacier-climate-change/
GIST	<p>Melting on Mount Everest's highest glacier is occurring at an alarming pace, according to a study published Thursday by a University of Maine-led research team. The team's findings suggested that ice that had taken decades to accumulate was melting away each year, jeopardizing both climbers and those who depend on the glacier for drinking water and irrigation.</p> <p>Though studies on the impacts of climate change are common, little work has been done on the melting of mountain glaciers in the highest parts of the world. In early 2019, National Geographic and Rolex's Perpetual Planet Everest Expedition began "the most comprehensive scientific investigation" ever attempted in the area, according to a press release about the study. As part of that expedition, the scientists obtained the highest-ever ice core and established the world's two highest automatic weather stations.</p> <p>By studying the ice core, taken from the South Col Glacier, as well as data from weather stations and satellite imagery, the researchers found that effects of climate change had not just reached the top of the highest mountain in the world, but had significantly altered its landscape in the last two decades. Crucially, the researchers found that the South Col Glacier has lost its snowpack — a thick covering of snow over the hard ice of the glacier — which accelerated the melting process.</p> <p>The scientists found that the South Col Glacier has lost 180 feet of thickness in the last 25 years — meaning it melted over 80 times faster than the 2,000 years it took to form the top layer of the glacier. The team blamed warming air temperatures, loss of humidity, and strong winds.</p> <p>"It answers one of the big questions posed by our 2019 NGS/Rolex Mount Everest Expedition — whether the highest glaciers on the planet are impacted by human-source climate change. The answer is a resounding yes, and very significantly since the late 1990s," Paul Mayewski, expedition leader and director of UMaine's Climate Change Institute, said in the release.</p> <p>The researchers also warned that the loss of the glacier ice could lead to significantly more exposed bedrock, which could make Mount Everest climbing expeditions more dangerous in the decades to come.</p> <p>"Climate predictions for the Himalaya suggest continued warming and continued glacier mass loss, and even the top of the Everest is impacted," added Mariusz Potocki, a glaciochemist who collected the ice core.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/02 NASA: ISS to plummet into watery grave
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/feb/02/international-space-station-will-plummet-to-a-watery-grave-in-2030
GIST	<p>The International Space Station (ISS) will continue its operations until 2030 before heading for a watery grave at the most remote point in the Pacific, Nasa confirmed in a new transition plan this week.</p> <p>More than 30 years after its 1998 launch, the ISS will be “de-orbited” in January 2031, according to the space agency's budget estimates. Once out of orbit the space station will make a dramatic descent before splash-landing in Point Nemo, which is about 2,700km from any land and has become known as the space cemetery, a final resting place for decommissioned space stations, old satellites and other human space debris.</p>

Also known as the “Oceanic Pole of Inaccessibility” or the “South Pacific Ocean Uninhabited Area”, the region around the space cemetery is known for its [utter lack of human activity](#). It’s “pretty much the farthest place from any human civilization you can find”, as [Nasa put it](#).

Nasa said it plans to continue future space research by buying space and time for astronaut scientists on commercial spacecraft.

While celebrating the ISS’s record of scientific accomplishments, Robyn Gatens, the director of the International [Space Station](#) at Nasa headquarters, also emphasized in a statement that its current goal was to “lay the groundwork for a commercial future in low-Earth orbit”.

“We look forward to sharing our lessons learned and operations experience with the private sector to help them develop safe, reliable and cost-effective destinations in space,” said Phil McAlister, the director of commercial space at Nasa headquarters, said in a statement.

Nasa estimated that transitioning its space research from a dedicated space station to renting space aboard commercial space ventures would save \$1.3bn in 2031 alone, and that the savings could “be applied to Nasa’s deep space exploration initiatives, allowing the agency to explore further and faster into deep space”.

The ISS, about the size of an American football field, orbits the Earth about once every 90 minutes, and has been continuously occupied by astronauts since November 2000.

In September, a Russian official warned that small cracks had been discovered on the space station that could worsen over time and [raised concerns](#) about ageing equipment and the risk of “irreparable failures”, BBC News reported.

The space station was originally intended to operate for just 15 years, but Nasa said in a report that “there is high confidence that ISS life can be further extended through 2030”, though some analyses of its viability are still being conducted.

ISS was “examining the recent technical issues aboard the Russian segment”, Nasa said in its report.

Since 1971, nearly 300 different chunks of space debris, including at least five space stations, have been sunk at Point Nemo, most of them American or Russian in origin, according to a law review article about the space cemetery’s [environmental impact](#).

The space station’s end is likely to be fiery. The “[downfall](#)” of Mir, the Russian space station, happened in March 2001, when a cargo ship fired its engines to push the space station out of orbit and send it plummeting towards Earth. While solar panels and other peripheral pieces of the space station broke off during its fall, about 20 to 25 tons of remnants fell together, resulting in sonic booms, according to Nasa’s documentation.

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HEADLINE	02/03 Why did the chicken cross the road?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/03/chicken-caught-us-pentagon-security-checkpoint-defense
GIST	<p>Why did the chicken cross the road? To break into the Pentagon, apparently. Or is it now the Hentagon – and is America about to have a new peck-retary of defense?</p> <p>A wandering chicken was caught sneaking around a security area at the Pentagon this week, a local animal welfare organization said.</p> <p>The hen was found running loose early Monday morning near the US Department of Defense headquarters on the outskirts of Washington DC, the Animal Welfare League of Arlington, Virginia wrote on social media.</p>

“Apparently, the answer to ‘why did the chicken cross the road’ is to get to the Pentagon,” the group [posted](#).

The chicken was taken into custody by one of the league’s employees.

Chelsea Jones, a spokesperson for the organization, said in an email that she couldn’t reveal the precise location where the bird was spotted.

“We are not allowed to disclose exactly where she was found,” Jones said. “We can only say it was at a security checkpoint.”

It’s also unclear where the chicken came from or how she got to the Pentagon.

The hen – which has brown feathers and a red comb and wattles – is a Rhode Island red. Jones described the bird as “sweet” and “nervous” but said the animal has permitted some people to pet her.

The Animal Welfare League asked people online for name suggestions, prompting various creative responses.

“I mean, chicken found on the military installation ... I suggest Colonel Sanderson,” one [user](#) wrote.

Another [said](#), “Chick Cheney, after the former Defense Secretary and VP.”

“Hentagon!” someone else [wrote](#). Similarly, another user [said](#), “Henrietta Kissinger?” in reference to Henry Kissinger, a former secretary of state.

“It’s probably not a joke that this chicken will prompt Congress to increase Department of Defense spending by \$12 billion,” [tweeted](#) Martin Austermuhle, a web and radio producer for WAMU 88.5.

The Animal Welfare League eventually chose Henny Penny for the chicken, one of the names given to the chicken that thinks “the sky is falling” in the folktale.

This one has gained notoriety of her own: Jimmy Fallon performed a song about her on The Tonight Show.

“Are you a normal clucker or an undercover spy,” Fallon sang on his Tuesday episode.

Jones said Henny Penny is being adopted by a staff member who has a small farm in western Virginia.

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	02/03 Violent crime doubles near homeless hotel
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/violent-crime-doubles-near-queen-anne-homeless-shelter
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — In Queen Anne on First Avenue North, the Inn at Queen Anne used to be a hotel but is now a homeless shelter.</p> <p>It was purchased by King County as part of “Health Through Housing” initiative last May.</p> <p>“It is time to work together to solve chronic homelessness,” said Dow Constantine, King County Executive. “Purchasing existing buildings means we can get housing that much quicker.”</p>

	<p>While people who live close by are for helping the county's homeless population, they tell us they have concerns about safety when in the area.</p> <p>"Sometimes I've seen people hanging out outside, sometimes I see police vehicles," said Heather Pihl said. "I don't walk go by and watch. It's just incidentally walking by and I go by every couple of days, walking up to the store, but it's my frequent path."</p> <p>In fact data from SPD's dashboard said while violent crime in Queen Anne is a down overall, on this specific block, there's been nearly double the reported incidents of violent crimes from May 2020 to May 2021. The same month the building was purchased by the county.</p> <p>Now this one of eight properties purchased by country for the program, only two of them are open. The other is an old Holiday Inn Express on Aurora near north 145th that was opened last October.</p> <p>Kobe Manning manages Pawn Kings just across the street and was all for it when he heard the news.</p> <p>"I was like, it's going to be a good thing for the homeless," Manning said.</p> <p>While he's still in support of the program, he feels shelters should not be near homes and businesses.</p> <p>"I got to beef up and be on high alert because I don't know what's going on around here," Manning said.</p> <p>We've reached out to county and city leaders regarding people's concerns about safety and have not heard back.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Threats of violence Seattle schools on rise
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/experts-urge-early-intervention-amid-increase-in-threats-of-violence-at-seattle-schools
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Threats of violence made toward Seattle Public Schools rose before winter break, according to a district spokesperson.</p> <p>In addition to the strain on local resources, students are facing serious consequences as a result.</p> <p>It was just in December that a student made a shooting threat directed toward Franklin High School. Even though police determined it wasn't a credible threat, school was canceled for a day and a student was even charged.</p> <p>"Of course, you're going to be nervous and, like, scared because that's your safety," Franklin High School senior Samuel Kassa told KOMO. He and other student recalled hearing about that December shooting threat on social media, directed toward their school and some students.</p> <p>"[My friend] told me, 'Hey there's someone on Snapchat that's, like, threatening me,'" senior Delano Cordova said.</p> <p>It turned out to be a non-credible threat, but with very real consequences. Officials told KOMO the 17-year-old reportedly involved was charged in January with felony harassment for threatening to kill, and false reporting.</p> <p>"This is one of the things we need to learn how to correctly address to make people feel [safer]," Cordova said.</p> <p>Cases like this one are top of mind for so many as SPS confirms an increase in threats directed toward its schools just before the holiday break.</p>

	<p>"Sometimes it's increased stress that's causing them to reach out in this way," Washington Association of Schools Psychologists President Cassie Mulivrana said.</p> <p>She said the pandemic and social media trends play a big factor, as well as a gap in the number of school psychologists, school counselors, school social workers and school nurses in the state.</p> <p>"I think we could be better at it but I think it would be a lot easier if we were fully staffed," she said. "We need to be having collaborative conversations. We need to be including the schools and the parents and the students as well as the outside providers [and] community-based mental health providers."</p> <p>Jimmy Hung is the Chief Deputy Prosecutor in King County's Juvenile Division who has reviewed over 100 cases of school threats in about seven years, and believes prevention has to happen early.</p> <p>"Understanding why a kid is feeling why they need to do it, like why they feel they need that attention," Hung said.</p> <p>The felony harassment charge comes with up to 30 days in jail and six months of supervised probation. But, Hung insists jail time isn't always the best solution and accountability for students could instead involve counseling, or consequences from schools like suspension or expulsion.</p> <p>"From what we know from the very large body of research that tells us that when we lock kids up in jail cells, they usually come out worse," Hung said. "We want to try to be really smart about how we deal with these kids who engage in this behavior and sometimes locking them up might make the situation worse so we're really cautious about that."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Seattle Central District stabbing: 1 injured
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/central-district-stabbing-leaves-man-seriously-injured
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Seattle police are investigating after a man was stabbed Wednesday in the Central District.</p> <p>After 7:30 p.m., officers responded to a call in the 1400 block of South King Street for a stabbing.</p> <p>Investigators said a 23-year-old man was walking home when he was stabbed by another man. The victim made it home and a family member called 911.</p> <p>The man was treated and taken to Harborview Medical Center in serious condition.</p> <p>After the victim gave police a description, officers detained two possible suspects in the area.</p> <p>"Officers at the scene determined additional investigation and review of evidence was needed to make an arrest for the stabbing," police said.</p> <p>According to police, two men were booked into the King County Jail on other charges, one for a burglary warrant and one for possession of an unlawful weapon.</p> <p>The investigation remains ongoing.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 South Seattle stabbing: 2 injured
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/2-injured-in-south-seattle-stabbing-suspect-in-custody
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Two men were injured in a stabbing in the Rainier Vista neighborhood Thursday evening, Seattle Police say.</p>

	<p>Witnesses told responding officers that an argument escalated into a fistfight. It is unknown how many people were involved, but a 52-year-old man and 62-year-old man were both injured—the 52-year-old suffering from stab wounds.</p> <p>The other man was evaluated at the scene and told medical personnel he did not want to go to the hospital, so he was released.</p> <p>Police arrested a suspect at the scene.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/03 Guilty plea withdrawn Arbery federal case
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/gregory-michael-withdraws-guilty-plea-federal-case-ahmaud/story?id=82647121
GIST	<p>Gregory McMichael, the retired Georgia police officer convicted in the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, informed a federal court Thursday evening that he has withdrawn his plans to plead guilty to federal hate crime charges connected to Arbery's death after a federal judge this week rejected the terms of a plea agreement reached with the Justice Department.</p> <p>Counsel for McMichael, the father of Travis McMichael, who shot Arbery in February 2020 three times at close range, informed U.S. District Court Judge Lisa Wood in a filing that they are now ready for him to stand trial on the federal hate crimes charges next week.</p> <p>It is still not clear whether Travis McMichael similarly plans to withdraw his plans to plead guilty after the hearing earlier this week when Wood said she could not accept the terms of the plea agreement reached between the DOJ and the McMichaels, which would have constrained her ability to determine their sentence.</p> <p>Wood told the men she wanted an answer by Friday.</p> <p>If Travis McMichael also decides to withdraw his pleas, they will go to trial next week with their co-defendant William "Roddie" Bryan, who was not offered the same plea deal.</p> <p>Gregory McMichael, 66, and his 36-year-old son were convicted of state murder charges last year along with Bryan, 52, and were all sentenced to life in prison, the McMichaels without the possibility of parole.</p> <p>Friday's decision by the McMichaels comes just days after Wood rejected a plea deal in which federal prosecutors guaranteed the men would be able to serve the first 30 years of confinement in federal prison.</p> <p>During a hearing on Monday in U.S. District Court in Brunswick, Georgia, Wood said she felt "uncomfortable" approving a plea deal that locked her into giving the McMichaels a three-decade sentence in a federal penitentiary. She noted that the case was in its early stages and said, "I can't say that 360 months is the precise, fair sentence in this case."</p> <p>Wood's decision came on the heels of Arbery's parents, Wanda Cooper-Jones and Marcus Arbery, giving impassioned statements in court. They asked the judge to deny the men their wish to go to federal prison, which is safer and better funded than most state prisons, according to legal experts.</p> <p>"Granting these men their preferred conditions of confinement would defeat me," Cooper-Jones told Wood. "It gives them one last chance to spit in my face after murdering my son."</p> <p>At Monday's hearing, assistant U.S. attorney Tara Lyons said Travis and Gregory McMichael agreed to plead guilty to count one of a multi-count indictment alleging they interfered with Arbery's right to enjoy the use of a public road he was jogging on "because of Arbery's race and color." Lyons said the agreement called for other charges to be dismissed, including attempted kidnapping and discharging a firearm during a violent crime.</p>

	<p>The agreement also called for the McMichaels to waive their right to appeal in both the federal and state cases.</p> <p>Arbery, 25, was fatally shot on Feb. 23, 2020, after the McMichaels saw him jogging in their Satilla Shores neighborhood near Brunswick, Georgia. They said they assumed Arbery was a burglar, armed themselves and chased him in their pickup truck. The McMichaels' neighbor, Bryan, joined the pursuit, blocking the victim's escape path with his truck.</p> <p>Bryan also used his cellphone to record Travis McMichael fatally shooting Arbery with a shotgun, video that became integral to their state murder convictions.</p>
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